

THE POSTMODERN TOON: (TOTALITARIAN)  
“FASCISM”, VIOLENCE, AND CARTOONS IN  
POSTMODERNIST LITERATURE ABOUT AMERICA

---

A Thesis

submitted in fulfilment

of the requirements for the Degree

of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the

University of Canterbury

by

Phillip Wise

---

University of Canterbury  
2001

PS  
3566  
Y53<sub>9</sub>  
W813

## Contents

2001

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>5</b>
 <b>Chapter one</b>	
<b>Preliminary: Cartoons .....</b>	<b>7</b>
The cartoon psycho.....	9
The cartoon rainbow .....	14
<i>Vineland</i> the toon.....	21
 <b>Chapter two</b>	
<b>Preliminary: Politics .....</b>	<b>25</b>
Pynchon's "counterculture politics" .....	27
"Structure" is structured in binary fashion .....	30
Traces, palimpsests and wrong paths taken.....	32
An alternative to systems.....	36
Radical democracy.....	39
What use is postmodernism? .....	43
 <b>Chapter three</b>	
<b>Totalitarian Control .....</b>	<b>51</b>
Control structures in Pynchon's novels .....	51
Totality, totalitarianism .....	58
Totalisation and the aestheticisation of politics.....	65
Aestheticised politics in <i>Vineland</i> .....	70
 <b>Chapter four</b>	
<b>A Total Fascist: Liminal Processes Favouring Totality .....</b>	<b>76</b>
Engineering conformity in <i>Vineland</i> .....	76
Liminal Processes Favouring Totality .....	83
<i>Vineland</i> : (totalitarian) "fascism" .....	86
 <b>Chapter five</b>	
<b>Armoured Egos on the Rampage .....</b>	<b>91</b>
Psychic armour in <i>Gravity's Rainbow</i> .....	91
Everything can be consumed: <i>American Psycho</i> .....	97
<i>American Psycho</i> , postmodern novel .....	101
Patrick Bateman's "ego maintenance" .....	102
The system dines out .....	107

A rogue element.....	109
<b>Chapter six</b>	
<b>Cartoons: Diminished Representations?</b> .....	117
Historical meaning of cartoon .....	119
Banal usages .....	126
<b>Chapter seven</b>	
<b>Cartoons and Postmodern Discourses</b> .....	135
Turning cartoon .....	137
Postmodernism as “cartoon” .....	143
<b>Chapter eight</b>	
<b>The Totalitarian Toon</b> .....	154
Cartoon (totalitarian) “fascists” .....	158
Tooning the body: beauty standards .....	163
Living the cartoon life .....	165
The drawing of lines .....	169
<b>Chapter nine</b>	
<b>Tooning Us On to Love, Laughter and Democracy</b> .....	173
Roger’s toon types: abnegatory and accepting cartoons .....	173
Toward a better world.....	179
Love .....	181
Laughter.....	187
<b>Chapter ten</b>	
<b>The Democratic Toon</b> .....	191
A “single co-ordinate” .....	191
Overcoming polarization in theory .....	200
The provisional .....	206
Engagement with liminal space that leads to the provisional.....	210
<b>Chapter eleven</b>	
<b>The Rabbit’s Handcuffs: Tying the Toon to the Real</b> .....	216
Anelypsis into the “real” scene.....	216
Politicizing the spectacle/seizing the means of interpretation.....	219
<b>References</b> .....	230

## Abstract

This thesis sets out to investigate the representation of politics as a cartoon in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland*, and to apply what we find to Bret Easton Ellis's controversial *American Psycho*. This investigation will also hold implications for other postmodernist literature, and for the possibility of constructing a "postmodern" politics capable of opposing the political order depicted in Pynchon's novels. Pynchon hints at such a politics, but tends to focus his writing on diagnosing reasons for their failure rather than prescribing for their success. Pynchon and Ellis both depict late, "postmodern" "spectacle" capitalist cultural environments as being in important respects "totalitarian" and "fascist". At the same time, the novels associate "fascism" with cartoons.

After initial chapters describing the place of both cartoons and politics in the novels under discussion, the three following chapters explore the three novels' politics in more depth and seek to justify a reading of their environments as being an amalgam of totalitarianism and fascism, or what I will call "(totalitarian) 'fascism'". These chapters identify and apply the concept of "Liminal Processes Favouring Totality" as an explanation for the existence of fascist structures and personalities in a late capitalist environment. Over the course of the final six chapters, the argument changes direction to explore the signification of "cartoons", which are found to support a cultural meaning wider than that of drawings or animations.

This wider metaphoric meaning is, broadly, the diminishment of representation to below three dimensions. The attachment of this signification to "cartoons" allows me to show that a "democratic" "postmodern" politics which is able to resist "Liminal Processes Favouring Totality" emerges from a reading of both Pynchon's and Ellis's texts. Ironically, in order to energize this sort of political response, both *Gravity's Rainbow* and *American Psycho* in particular are designed to affect the reader outside the world of the text they are reading, that is, in that very reality many critics say postmodernism denies.



## Acknowledgements

I'd especially like to thank Patrick Evans for his supervision, advice and support, even when things weren't going very well. Thanks to Denis Walker, Kate Trevella, and the rest of the staff at the English Department at the University of Canterbury. Thanks to the University itself for awarding me a doctoral scholarship, making life easier for three years. Thanks too to someone I've never met: Tim Ware for providing an indispensable Web Guide to three of Pynchon's novels at <http://www.hyperarts.com/pynchon/gravity/gravity-f.html>. *Gravity's Rainbow* is a labyrinth, and I'd have been driven mad finding things without that particular resource.

In addition, I would like to thank everyone who has helped me or taught me over the years, but in particular Jim, Jul, Helen, Teresa; the Baltakmens family, especially Dagny and Ross and Andrei; Tamsin, Nick, Christina and Howard, Andrea and Simon; Don, Cheryl, Daniel and Greg; Kate, Chanel and André, Andrew, Rob, Rosie, Luke, Sonya and all the others I have, no doubt forgotten as my memory fades with age. But most of all Xander, aged two and a half as I write this, who is the best kid in the world.

*I'm just staying home tonight,  
getting lost in that hopeless little screen.  
But I'm stubborn as those garbage bags  
that time cannot decay  
I'm junk but I'm still holding up  
this little wild bouquet:  
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.*

-Leonard Cohen

*No more absolutes,  
No more absolutes,  
Stick your penitentiary clothes inside the vent  
And run along*

-Pavement

## Chapter one

### Preliminary: Cartoons

This thesis theorises an aspect of postmodernism, one of its fragments. As a cultural, aesthetic and academic phenomenon, postmodernism has proved to be spectacularly successful. So successful, in fact, that the concepts and language captured by the term are now considered to have become a new orthodoxy in the academy (see for example, Bauerlein 2001). Both high art and popular culture increasingly play with such postmodern concerns and techniques as endless irony, self-reflexivity, “hyperreality”, the fate of the subject, the free play of the signifier, the end of the large cultural “metanarratives” and the consequent or causative fragmentation of discourse, including the collapse of generally assumed hierarchies (Lyotard 1984; Foster 1983, and many since). Despite this, some fundamental questions about postmodernism have yet to be satisfactorily explored.

Throughout its career, many claims have been made on behalf of postmodern concepts. The ones I wish to focus on here are claims, sometimes made for or against postmodernism that broadly fall under the category of politics. Many practitioners of postmodern art and commentators on postmodern culture have regarded the fragmentation of the power of universalised “metanarratives” as a positive event for “progressive” politics (represented by feminist, indigenous people’s, gay rights, environmental, and anti-capitalist movements, for example). This is because these “metanarratives” have hitherto supported dominant discourses that have oppressed marginal sections of the population and enabled the unchecked power of elites. Their diminished status – postmodernity transforms them, supposedly, into narratives that have no superior claim to privilege – has understandably excited politicised groups on the margins, who identified the opportunity to advance the standing of their own identity-narratives into an equal position, one neither privileged or marginal. As Lyotard trumpeted in his important early essay *The Postmodern Condition*, “let us wage a war on

totality” (1984, 82). (Others to take a similar stance include Laclau 1985; 1995; Butler 1990; Jencks 1987; Hutcheon 1988).

Another set of commentators pursue a set of arguments that say these claims are misguided. These can be divided into several subgroups, such as those who reject the existence or importance of postmodernist concepts, or who believe that modernity is still a relevant concept (Habermas 1983; Morawski 1994); those who regard postmodernism as an expression of capitalism and therefore incapable of serious resistance to it, (Jameson 1983; c1991; Eagleton 1988, among others including many conservative and traditional thinkers who may have no interest in postmodern concerns), and those who see in the postmodernist questioning of “metanarratives” the end of united resistance to the dominance of capitalist concepts in discourse and society (Waugh 1992; the *Transformation* group; Wood 1995; Anderson 1984 and others). These arguments overlap, and the groupings of them are in no way pure. However, one thing that emerges from the many sides of the debate, and on the left especially, is a widespread (although not universal) neo-Marxist belief that the capitalism that produces a postmodern spectacle is a system that has tendencies toward producing itself as a totality that leaves nothing unaccounted for (for example Debord 1967; Jameson c1991; Horkheimer and Adorno 1993).

A related issue is that of how those postmodern artists whose political instincts seem to tend toward democratic openness are to respond to a world living its postmodernity in totalitarian conditions. Is there in fact a democratic experience of postmodernity to be theorised? If postmodern conditions can lead to democracy, why, then, does the totalitarian version appear to have won out? If the answer to this has something to do with a general nostalgia for a centre and stability, then how might these concerns be addressed without reintroducing authoritarian or totalitarian conditions? These are some of the questions the postmodernism of Thomas Pynchon’s and Bret Easton Ellis’s novels invite, if one can read these novels as both postmodern texts *and* political tracts with a corresponding relationship to a broadly defined reality or set of signifieds.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore these issues in two of Thomas Pynchon’s novels, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) and *Vineland* (1990), and in Bret Easton Ellis’s

*American Psycho* (1991). All three of these texts, I believe, approach this problem aesthetically, because they all assume that the politics of a postmodern environment is aestheticised. An aesthetic category they privilege, I will contend, is the cartoon. All three novels flaunt cartoon references, but in addition, the books are to a large extent written *as* cartoons. If they can be read as a type of cartoon themselves, I may be able to generalise a little about such references, allusions and representations in postmodernism and popular culture in general, because they have become an increasingly common representational tactic. My contention is that in these books, the presence of cartoon references and representations each inform the political project of the author. All three novels, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland* and *American Psycho*, are political novels as well as aesthetic objects; both authors, I believe, wish their art to have a political impact in the actual world, the worlds of the reader and the writer rather than merely the characters.

### *The cartoon psycho*

Clearly this is not an unproblematic concept, and nor is it treated as such in the texts themselves. It is also an aspect of Pynchon's writing that is hardly ever considered by commentators, perhaps because he largely intends his novels to function rhetorically, even though there is little doubt that rhetoric can affect action. But it is also never mentioned in regards to Ellis's book, at least not in a political context. It seems to have taken some time for commentators to be comfortable with the idea that *American Psycho* could represent an argument against 1980s capitalism and its social effects, or even just its excesses. Many instead assumed the novel was merely an exploitation of 1980s capitalism, likely to create negative social effects itself. One of the reasons for this confusion is that for Ellis to case a critique of late 1980s "yuppie" culture in such extreme terms suggests that he wants to affect the way people view that culture and their position in relation to it. As a result, the novel produces what Laura Kipnis calls "reaction formations" (see Freccero 1997, 50n8): a feminist group in the U.S., the National Organisation of Women, described it as a "how-to manual for the torture and dismemberment of women" (Freccero, 50; see also Young 1992, 86).

On the other hand, it should be noted that the Psycho, Patrick Bateman, is not

only dangerous to women. The arbitrary nature of Bateman's killings in the novel, coupled with the impunity he enjoys when he commits the murders, suggests that any character in the book is potentially his victim. However, Bateman is constructed as being "representative" of the culture which has produced him: Elizabeth Young has suggested that "Bateman" might in fact be the consciousness of several of the novel's stockbrokers, or may not exist at all except as a cipher (see Young, 117-19). As Carla Freccero suggests, the lack of psychological depth to Bateman's character deprives the reader of comfort: most murderers in serious fiction have psychologically cased motives that provide a narrative that will enable readers to "understand" them, whereas "Ellis refuses us a consoling fantasy, a fetish for our disavowals; instead he returns us to that history and to the historicity of violence" (56). By widening the meaning of Bateman beyond the agency of a person to that of a cultural signifier, Ellis suggests that the sort of system Bateman kills on behalf of extends to the one the reader lives in as well. Although the world of *American Psycho* is a cartoon of the one actually experienced in that world, readers are nonetheless included in Bateman's set of potential victims.

Pynchon does something similar with his characterisation of *Gravity's Rainbow's* rocket, representing all the "rational systems" criticised in the novel and the "real" consequences of potential nuclear war they have lead to, about to fall upon the head of not just the novel's cast, but its readership as well. At the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the rocket, which had been safely contained within an historical narrative and location, suddenly explodes rhetorically out of the book's pages and into the "reality" of the book's present. It becomes, instead of a device used by a fictional character (Major Weissmann, who fires the rocket at the end of the novel, is also rhetorically "fired" into the present "real" world of the reader), all the world's warheads, and the "system" that created the need for them, and they target, suggests the book, us all. Readers who lived under the threat of intercontinental nuclear war knew this was true, and it is in many ways no less true today.

Laura Tanner suggests that Ellis constructs his readership as victims in another way. The book's repetition, banality, gruesome detail, and lack of realistic characterisation means that it acts on a reader in a similar way to Bateman acting upon one of his victims, when he forces her to watch a video of a previous murder. Bateman's

“goal is not only to torture and murder [a victim] but to make her see that torture and murder as inevitable, necessary conclusion. Insofar as the novel terrorises the reader, it is because it denies the reader’s subjectivity in just such a way” (1994, 111). She calls for “oppositional reading... [opposing] the very terms of readership implicit in the text” (114). Indeed, such a strategy is called for. The need for this strategy is also implicit in the text, by way of what readers can discern of the satirical project of the novel’s implied author: the narrative appears to be encouraging readers who are not masochists to develop strategies to resist Bateman’s logic as well, even if some of them take Bateman and Ellis to be the same figure, and call for the book’s suppression.

One possibility for achieving this may lie with the way Ellis attempts to give the book a *physical* impact that will affect readers in a way that might influence their politics (or cause them to acquire some). (I should here make a warning about the graphically violent and sexualised nature of *American Psycho*’s content, some of which is quoted in this thesis). Such a physical impact is demonstrated most dramatically in *American Psycho*, in the way Ellis manipulates his readers, particularly his male ones. He does this by exploiting the intent of most pornography, which is to arouse the reader sexually. However, having done this, Ellis strategically inserts a shocking juxtaposition:

...while Christie lies on her back Elizabeth pushes [a dildo] easily into her cunt. During this I lick Christie’s tits and suck hard on each nipple until both of them are red and stiff. I keep fingering them to make sure they stay that way. During this Christie has kept on a pair of thigh-high suede boots from Henri Bendel that I have made her wear.

Elizabeth, naked, running from the bedroom, blood already on her is moving with difficulty and she screams out something garbled. (*American Psycho*, 289)

During the sexual part of the episode, Bateman keeps reminding readers of his power: he “makes” Christie wear a costume, he “makes” Elizabeth suck on a dildo (*ibid*). These coercions pass nearly unnoticed. (This is a highly personalised reading<sup>1</sup>, I realise,

---

<sup>1</sup> The opposing view is provided by Steven Hill (undated internet page), who criticised Ellis for “[writing] long passages that begin as sexual turn-ons for male heterosexual readers, and end in a bloody orgy of murder and torture”. The reviewer goes on to assert “this subconsciously conditions the reader to experience sexuality linked with brutal, sexual violence”. Few reviewers went as far as this, however, as Hill’s review fails to provide any context for the excerpts it presents, and therefore conveys a widely misleading picture of the novel, while the psychological assertion he makes remains unsubstantiated.

but I hope it will enable me to hint at the mechanics of Ellis's tactic). The coercions are half-hidden partly because of the intensity of the pornography, which can distract readers from the power issues involved, and partly because both women are acting, and hence are merely following Bateman's "script". Elizabeth is playing sexual games which she seems to be enjoying (Bateman, however, has laced her wine with Ecstasy), while Christie is a prostitute. These male power tactics hint at the coercion of the spectacle, which is all-pervasive in the novel. Then, without warning, comes the violent episode, rendered in the same affectless language as the sexual one. This crosses a line – the aroused male reader is not, I believe, supposed to remain aroused, but to become deeply shocked, and perhaps to experience guilt. The juxtaposition here functions in the way outlined by Susan Buck-Morss in an article on Walter Benjamin; we suddenly recognise our daily culture, our assumptions, to be continuous with Bateman's (Buck-Morss 1992, 41), a point I will take up again in Chapter eleven. The sexual episode seems suddenly not so opposed to the violent one; the mechanics of control and power that are subtly introduced in the first are let loose in the second. The aroused reader will feel this complicity physically, his or her body reacting to the change.

The juxtaposition here camouflages briefly another one just as significant: that between the actual reality of the contrasting physical reactions the text provokes, and the opposite of these, an element of the obviously not-real in the world of the text and of the reader experiencing Ellis's manipulation. This is because the manipulation itself is just that, a trap constructed by the author. In this sense the reader is drawn into the world of the book; their physical response becomes a part of the artwork, and so joins the realm of the cultural in a way that makes it very clearly cultural. In terms of the text itself, it is at the same time clearly not real, and, as some critics have complained, it is not even a particularly good imitation.

Consequently, one of the first things many commentators note about *American Psycho*, either directly or by implication, is how cartoonish it is. Elizabeth Young, author of an early piece on the novel, describes it as "comic-book hyperreality" (86), a description others have concurred with. Another group of reviewers and critics, most typically represented by Norman Mailer, chide Ellis for not giving Bateman sufficient



“inner life” for us to “apprehend him” (ibid)<sup>2</sup>. Cartoons are often assumed to be all surface, to have no depth or inner life. Bateman is never “apprehended” in this novel: not only do the police never catch him, but his personality is so ephemeral it becomes a “cipher” (103), the essential Bateman forever elusive. He is like an exhibit in a chamber of Horrors, one who escapes the consequences of his actions time after time. Bateman’s impunity to the law, despite being incredibly careless in the commission of some of his crimes, brings to mind cartoons such as *South Park*, in which the same regular character dies in each episode.

Indeed, the novel’s self-referentiality, ably examined by Young, adds to its aura of cartoon-ness, at the same time as it marks the novel’s retreat from realistic characterisation. Bateman is an example of the “death of the subject” that some postmodernist discourses claim is a condition of postmodernity. Bateman appears to have little or no subjectivity beyond the culture he recycles, be they rules of etiquette, restaurant reviews or biographies of famous serial killers. The killer himself appears to know this, and rationalises his violence by way of this explanation:

*I simply am not there. It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent. My conscience, my pity, my hopes disappeared a long time ago (probably at Harvard) if they ever did exist.... My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world for anyone. In fact I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape. But even after admitting this – and I have, countless times, in just about every act I have committed – and coming face to face with these truths, there is no catharsis. (American Psycho, 377)*

Ellis writing Bateman as a cartoon, sketchy and unformed, links Ellis with a far more complex predecessor, Thomas Pynchon, and Bateman with some of Pynchon’s more cartoonish creations. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Vineland*, Pynchon also depicts worlds in which a culture of totality successfully dominates democratic elements, and in Pynchon too these worlds have a substantial cartoon presence. In these novels of Pynchon’s, however, a purpose behind the cartoons is more easily discernible. This is a

---

<sup>2</sup> Despite this, Mailer does understand much of what Ellis attempts to do in *American Psycho*. For a discussion, see Freccero, 51-2.

purpose Ellis shares, perhaps instinctively rather than rationally. Both writers know that late capitalism tends to produce cartoon-like effects in real life, but Pynchon expands this knowledge into a political critique. This critique of Pynchon's, however, allows us to read Ellis's novel in a more politically informed way, as resonances of meaning in Pynchon's cartoons can in turn inflect Bateman's meaning.

### The cartoon rainbow

Readings of *Gravity's Rainbow*'s "cartoon" elements remain rare, despite the academic industry that has been built up around Pynchon in recent years. This is also despite the fact that the novel itself openly invites such readings. In Raymond Olderman's words, "[the] book is, among other things, a terrific comic book for synthesis freaks" (1983, 223). From the book's opening sequences, its narrative is presented in a cartoonish way. The initial scenes involving British officers at Pirate Prentice's house are pure slapstick. After awaking from his apocalyptic dream of the German V2 rocket striking London during World War Two, Pirate saves a plummeting Teddy Bloat by kicking his wheeler-bed across the room for Bloat to land safely on. Not much later, Bloat slips, Chaplain-like, on a discarded banana peel. Such hints recur throughout the narrative. In the company of apprentice witch Geli Tripping, AWOL American GI Tyrone Slothrop is fearful of her lover Tchitcherine's rage should he discover them together. His fantasy of Tchitcherine's entrance is that of a cartoon super-hero: "Tchitcherine comes roaring through the window, a Nagant blazing in his fist. Tchitcherine lands in a parachute and fells Slothrop with one judo chop. Tchitcherine drives a Stalin tank right into the room, and blasts Slothrop with a 76mm shell. Thanks for stalling him, Liebchen, he was a spy, well, cheerio, I'm off to Peenemünde and a nubile Polish wench with tits like vanilla ice cream, check you later" (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 293). Similarly, in other episodes, Slothrop defeats his nemesis Major Marvy in a mid-air custard-pie fight, and Tchitcherine hears of a subversive plot to throw a pie in Stalin's face (353).

Recognisable cartoons chase the narrative about. Slothrop is always reading "Plasticman" comic books (Steven Weisenberger notes that *Gravity's Rainbow* "often

slides into the rhetorical mode of Plasticman" [1988, 114]). Later Slothrop becomes part of a Superhero parody set in a conjectural rocket state of the future, Slothrop playing a member of the "floundering Four", each of whom "lack a quality" (283). They are each flawed by their gift and so are "unfit by it for human living" (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 675). Late in the novel, Superman, Submarina and the Lone Ranger all try to stop the final firing of the 00000 rocket the novel provisionally centres around, but they are "too late" (752).

Cartoon and comic-book creatures and objects such as Dumbo the elephant, Donald Duck, Hop Harrigan, the Cheshire Cat, Bugs Bunny, Wonder Woman and the Yellow Brick Road all make appearances. Characters sometimes fantasise cartoonish existences for themselves: one character, Géza Rózsavölgyi, dissolves and imagines himself on a group of "comic-book orange chunks of island" (634), where it is safe – paradise, in short. One thing that can be noted at this stage is that all of these characters are the pawns of the amorphous power structure referred to variously as "They", "the elect" or "The Firm", and as the black marketer Der Springer notes, pawns "are condemned to creep in two dimensions" (494), consigned to live in the realm of the cartoon. He has taken on the persona of the knight in chess – "*flight has been given only to the springer!*" (494 Pynchon's italics) – a mark of his doomed-to-fail ambitions to become "elected" – to transcend the limited existence of preterite life, the lives of those passed over by the powerful. These two-dimensional pawns, then, do things such as enact "Keystone-cop" chase sequences, and break out into obviously-staged song-and-dance routines, which are the sort of events Slothrop is constantly becoming involved in. By transgressing outside of "realistic" representation, they call attention to themselves as "actors", who act to the direction of Them in Their scheme against Slothrop, author Pynchon in the wider drama of the novel, and for choreographer of the musical comedy that continually breaks into the action.

The slipperiness of Slothrop's identity throughout the novel also contributes to this feeling. He spends part of the narrative dressed in Wagnerian costume as "Rocketman" (366), a 1940s comic book character, according to Weisenburger (179), and another part dressed as a multi-coloured festival pig. He has several false identities forged for him, including war correspondent Ian Scuffing, and Max Schlepzig, which

turns out to be the stage name of an actor in one of the films Gerhardt von Göll made before he became *Der Springer* (*Alpdrücken*, important to several strands of the plot)<sup>3</sup>. He seems easily able to affect these changes in identity, and takes them in his stride for much of the narrative. This is because he has the transformative power inherent in a cartoon. As Timothy Melley notes about him, “[Slothrop’s] primary mode of interaction with others is impersonation” (Melley 1994, 732). Slothrop’s impersonations are very thin representations, designed only to fool those who do not know the person. Before Slothrop fragments altogether in the last pages of the novel, his disguises become progressively more fantastic – although in Wagnerian costume, with the horns removed from the helmet “Rocketman” resembles a cartoon superhero more than a character from the world of high art. His fame is gained by performing a superhuman and yet lowly deed – he retrieves several pounds of hashish from a heavily guarded compound (the temporary residence of president Truman, no less), to furnish Saure Bummer’s black market with product.

His other disguise, Plechazunga, a tenth century German Pig Hero, is another super being. There are many references to pigs in the novel, and throughout they are associated with preterition, mirroring Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s (1986, 44-59) association of pigs with the carnival of Bakhtin. According to Bakhtin, carnival was a tradition where peasants spent several days revelling, and overturning established hierarchies, in particular mounting celebrations of bodily substances and impersonations of the gentry (see Bakhtin 1984, 1-58 for an overview). The association with preterition is also reflected in the fact that a character who upsets an elite social gathering with playful references to rotting food and bodily processes is named “Pig” Bodine. A preterite sympathiser at that gathering has Porky Pig tattooed on his stomach. Pig becomes a member of the Counterforce, where one of his comrades, Osbie Feel, also sports the Porky Pig tattoo.

Actually, cartoons inform much of Pynchon’s aesthetic. The cartoon he calls “Porky Pig and the Anarchist”, which appears in both the earlier *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “gets at the bedrock of the novel’s paranoia”, according

---

<sup>3</sup> The film’s pornographic nature is extremely powerful in the novel, responsible for the conception of both Bianca Erdmann (395) and Ilse Pökler (397).

to Mark Irwin (1991). Irwin has found that Pynchon alludes to a real Porky Pig cartoon, one called "The Blow Out" (1936). This cartoon is so apt that it might even be said that Pynchon's view of postmodernism is predicated upon it. In it, Porky has found that he can earn pennies by picking up things that people have left behind and then giving them back. One of these people turns out to be a "mad bomber", who Porky continually tracks down and returns his bomb to. The bomber finds that Porky "is always there". "You'd never see the little fellow *get* there... he'd just *be* there" (56). Irwin says of this, "In its comic repetitions, manic zaniness, and apocalypticism, as well as its metafiction, pop surrealism and undergirding paranoia, 'The Blow Out' dishes up a pretty decent map of the rhetoric we encounter in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*" (56). By not seeing the pig arrive where the bomber is, viewers, and the bomber, are forced to make connections for themselves, to try to re-form a lost whole narrative, but one which cannot be simply explained with logic. *Gravity's Rainbow*, full of such leaps, often seems cartoonish, especially to those readers who "will want cause and effect" (663), as the narrator at one point acerbically puts it, because "cause and effect" explains things and satisfactorily covers these gaps over with information, and hence can make things seem more realistic. It is the act of covering these gaps, assuming an overarching logical order behind what appears, that Pynchon sees as a paranoid act. Pynchon's novel most vehemently opposes overarching orders of this sort that pretend to explain everything, as they overlook, or pass over, other possibilities in much the same way as the elect pass over the preterite.

As if instinctively, Slothrop knows that cartoons have a power over Them and Their plots against him. He seems to associate cartoons and paranoia, although he remains unsure about exactly how they relate to one another. Upon being stripped of his identity when one of Their creatures steals all his clothes and papers, Slothrop whispers "fuck you" to Them, "the only spell he knows and a pretty good all-purpose one at that" (203). This profanity is associated with the power to escape Their power. But Slothrop wants something more permanent: "maybe he'll sneak in [...] sometime, with a bucket and brush, paint FUCK YOU in a balloon coming out of the mouth of those little pink shepherdesses there..." (203). Not only does he want to inscribe an obscenity as a way of getting back at the grandness of Their scheme, he desires to do it in comic-book style.

The “spell” of the obscene utterance is thus associated with a form of cartoon. But here the cartoon itself is also brought into the realm of the obscene: the shepherdess he wants to deface is on one of “thousands of tiny rococo surfaces” (203); Slothrop thus defaces high art with low, the intricate with the crudely straightforward.

However, cartoons are treated ambivalently by Pynchon in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The central conflict of the book is between the “elect”, a massive, shady conspiracy with “metanarratives” so powerful they define reality, and the “preterite”, the people who are usually overlooked by “Their” providential concepts of history, but who have to live with the material consequences. In among this conflict, cartoons are both a menace and a gift. As H. Brenton Stevens notes, there are many parallels between Rocketman and Superman, not the least of which is that they both ultimately fail (1997, 41; 47). Slothrop, as Jeffrey S. Baker notes, is too addicted to the “mindless pleasures” that comics and cartoons are often accused of promoting to actually challenge Them directly (1993, 107). But this failure of them both is not necessarily terminal for cartoons as a potentially resistant trope in the novel. As I have said, cartoons are associated throughout with preterition. As such, they belong to the same existential realm as the preterite generally: passed over, but sometimes useful to Them, often without knowing it. Although the Superheroes are “too late” to stop Blicero firing the rocket, it is still possible that in other circumstances these cartoons might have been able to help, but there has been something unspecified preventing them. Since these “Superheroes” have spent their time defending the sort of patriotic values Pynchon attacks as fascist (see Stevens, 39), as values of the very rocket they are now trying to stop, perhaps their change in consciousness is “too late”. As Stevens says, “[t]he Rocket will be launched and the heroes, both preterite and elect, will be unable finally to oppose Their will (47). Slothrop’s cartoon incarnation in the “Floundering Four” is similarly prevented from succeeding by Their control structures (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 674-80). But these failures take place in a cartoon-future, totalitarian “Rocket State”. Cartoons are associated with resistance, with the preterite, and with spells against Them – as Their pawns, also, then, with the failure to resist. But the total, totalitarian city is somehow also cartoonish, as if cartoons are also an effect of Their power. So there seems to be some ambivalence in the text about cartoons.

Certainly cartoons can be co-opted by Them. Dumbo the Elephant, for instance, clutches the “feather” of Their system – the ultimately useless totem of reliance upon something outside of himself in order to “fly”. He was taught all his life he could not fly, that he lacks the “physical grace” (741) to and so he believes he needs something to cling to – he cannot finally let go of the exterior crutch. Pig Bodine is out of Their control once he leaves his “Dumbo” stage, at which point he discovers that he is also a carnival animal who can fly on his own<sup>4</sup>. Pynchon accuses some cartoons of propaganda: “the lads in Hollywood telling us how grand it all is over here [in the war] how much fun, Walt Disney causing Dumbo the Elephant to clutch to that feather like how many carcasses under the snow tonight among the white painted tanks [...]” (135). The Superheroes who arrive “too late”, for instance, represent Their system – they all take after the hero of the Fu Manchu novels, Sir Denis Nayland Smith, who, according to Steven Weisenburger, represents “a single-minded puritanical devotion to work and a chivalric devotion to battling the dangers of evil” (146). Superman, for instance, is “The Man of Steel”, a total being with, notwithstanding the comic-book’s American-Jewish origins, a more than passing resemblance to the Nazi ideal<sup>5</sup>. So, when they fail to stop the Rocket’s launch, it was because “their programming” that never included “too late” (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 752) was from the totality – they faced themselves in the Rocket and were lost. It was at the impossible moment of absolute totalisation that their failure came; they faced their lack of control and hence their inescapable corporeality: Superman’s “curls on his head begin to show their first threads of gray” (751), Philip Marlowe’s alcoholism and lifestyle cause him migraine and homesickness, Plasticman is no longer “perfect” (he comes up against a plastic, <sup>6</sup>Imipolex G, that is greater than he is), and the Lone Ranger’s friend dies at the hanging tree (752). This hint at their own imperfection causes a crisis of confidence that ends up reinforcing Their system, leaving them clutching feathers of their own:

---

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, for Them, the preterite might be allowed such independence “when pigs fly”.

<sup>5</sup> The similarities do not end with Superman’s physique. Kaplan (1986) pointed out that Nazis paradoxically desired the products of industrial technology without the labour of production (23). Superman incorporates many abilities such as flight, the ability to move very quickly, x-ray vision and impenetrable body armour that new technologies were enabling people to achieve at the time, but only with technologies produced by industrial society. Superman is thus a fantasy of an extended masculinity without the normal industrial processes normally required for people to be able to do these things.

[t]hey find instead a moment's suspending of their sanity – but then it's over with, whew, and it's back to the trail, back to the *Daily Planet*. *Yes Jimmy, it must've been the day I ran into that singularity, those few seconds of absolute mystery... you know Jimmy, time – time is a funny thing....* There'll be a thousand ways to forget. The heroes will go on, kicked upstairs to oversee the development of bright new middle-line personnel, and they will watch their system falling apart, watch those singularities begin to come more and more often, proclaiming another dispensation out of the tissue of old-fashioned time, and they'll call it cancer, and just won't know what things are coming to, or what's the meaning of it all, Jimmy.... (ibid; Pynchon's emphasis)

Not all cartoons are as easily co-opted by the Firm. The more anarchic Warner brothers characters, for example, seem to gain more approval from the narrative. Although Pynchon clearly does not trust Disney, associating him with death (70), propaganda (135), and Slothrop's paranoia (392-3), Porky Pig represents a jovial imperfection and naivety. As we know, the pig is a preterite animal. Once again, failure is mixed up with this: as Stallybrass and White have argued, while the carnival, and hence the pig, seem to be on the side of the preterite, the carnival may in fact be a way of allowing the oppressed to let off steam, channel revolutionary desires harmlessly (13-14). Certainly, the Counterforce ultimately fails, and Slothrop's political stance, if it was ever one to begin with, ends up as a non-political personal hedonism. In this he is like one comic he is compared to: "The name of the hero-or being-was Sundial. The frames never enclosed him-or it-long enough to tell. Sundial, flashing in, flashing out again, came from 'across the wind', by which readers understood 'across some flow, more or less sheet and vertical', a wall in constant motion – over there was a different world, where Sundial took care of business they would never understand" (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 472). Although he cannot be contained, nor can Sundial be understood, so that his usefulness is limited. Nonetheless he must have seemed dangerous to Them: his book "was virtually uncirculated" (472), which usually happens because something contains information They want suppressed. Porky Pig and the group of cartoons he leads seem also to contain this dangerous potential. These other Warner Brothers characters appear in *Vineland*.



Vineland the toon

*Vineland* continues Pynchon's use of cartoons in both the senses that have begun to emerge in this discussion. These include many allusions, as well as the general sense that the entire environment of the novel may itself be cartoonish. *Vineland* has fewer moments of preposterous comic non-reality – the song and dance routines and cartoonish slapstick escapades have retreated (a little) – but references to cartoons are shifted slightly into the centre. This is partly a function of the proliferation of images and allusions from television and other popular culture in the later novel. If in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon can be relied on to invoke high culture at least as often as he does popular, in *Vineland*, because television steps into the novel's thematic centre, a far higher proportion of allusion comes from TV and popular music instead. This may be because his latest book is set in 1984, when the popular image is exploited far more fully than even film was in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Hence television is seen as one of the major tools of social engineering supporting Reagan's "fascist" regime. It intrudes into people's everyday lives, so that in *Vineland* "reality" looks considerably different to how it looked to previous generations, even to Frenesi Gates' parents. Here, everybody is addicted to television, to the point where Frenesi's daughter Prairie could sing the theme to *Gilligan's Island* as an infant before she could talk, and where a DEA agent, Hector Zuñiga is committed to the detoxification centre for his television addiction. The very fact that there *is* a TV detoxification centre testifies to the Baurillardian "hyperreal" nature of its world. Pop-culture tends to pervade everything. Zoyd is a rock & roll musician; Frenesi is a film-maker turned bureaucrat. Isaiah belongs to a punk band called Billy Barf and the Vomitones. On top of this are the presence of Hell's Angels who masquerade as an order of nuns and a group of nuns who are an order of Ninjettes.

*Vineland*, as Joseph Slade notes, seems lightweight compared to *Gravity's Rainbow*, because of the one-dimensionality of its references: "The question for many readers nevertheless remains whether a work so grounded in popular culture can support the themes that have earned Pynchon admiration in the past" (1994, 69). Here, also, not only are the characters often allegorical at best (sometimes they are drawn quite fully, others hardly at all), but they are often drawn explicitly in cartoon form. DL Chastain, a

friend of Prairie's, and a former friend of her missing mother, has become a professional Ninjette, having had a distinguished, if not exactly faultless career as a fighting prodigy, with profiles in such publications as *Aggro World*, and a runner-up medal in the "dangerous Miss Teen" pageant. A lot about DL's vocation is rendered cartoonish, exaggerated well beyond mere stereotypical borrowings from martial-arts movies. For instance, some of the "strategies excluded from the Kumi-Uchi, or official ninja combat system" (127) include "the Enraged Sparrow, the Hidden Foot, the Nosepicking of Death, and the truly unspeakable *Gojira no Chimpira*... some of the moves Inoshiro Sensei taught DL would only make sense ten years or more from now – requiring that much rigorous practice every day for her even to begin to understand..." (127). As if to reinforce this cartoonish impression, DL's response to Prairie's quite innocent question about DL's partner Takeshi Fumimota is explicitly identified as cartoonishly overplayed:

"Uh, so how'd you guys meet?"

"Aauuhhgghh!" First time outside Saturday morning cartoons Prairie had ever seen anybody scream with such intensity. "Gee, thought it was a pretty innocent question...." (129).

Later, DL breaks Frenesi out of an FBI prison camp, and they move around "smooth as Daffy and Bugs" (255). Brock Vond, meanwhile, is charmed with cartoon-like luck (Tabbi 1994, 96). After an attempt on Brock's life failed, gangster Ralph Wayvone mutters to himself, "Fucking Vond, he's the Roadrunner" (*Vineland*, 153). Joseph Tabbi, in an ambivalent critical article, calls Vond a "cartoon bad guy" (1994, 96). Takeshi (then an insurance quasi-agent investigating the destruction of a research facility apparently trampled into oblivion by Godzilla) resembles Brock, whose looks are "a stressed and malevolent cartoon of [Takeshi's] face" (*Vineland*, 148). When he first sees Brock, Takeshi "thought for a terrified second or two it was himself and something radical, like death, had just happened" (148). Takeshi, then, associates the cartoon version of himself with death – and, because Brock is continually identified in the novel with fascism, Takeshi's cartoon likeness is Takeshi-as-fascist. (This may be one way to approach Takeshi's appearance in *Gravity's Rainbow* as one of the "Komical Kamikazes" [*Gravity's Rainbow*, 690].) In this description, fascism is therefore equated

with death at the same time. As well, this is a premonition: the attempted assassination of Brock actually catches Takeshi, metaphorically, in the crossfire, and equally metaphorically it “kills” him. Takeshi’s vision here foreshadows the moment DL “kills” him by applying the Ninja technique of “the vibrating palm”, which takes up to a year to actually cause its victim to die. Having caught wind of the plan against him, Brock pays Takeshi to enter a red-light club in which Brock is expected. In a sense Takeshi impersonates Vond here, while DL impersonates not Frenesi, but Frenesi’s *type*: “Mr Brock Vond likes American girl, looking just this way, always the same” (140), the make-up artist tells DL. At each point, the person is put at a remove from their “real” identity. Takeshi is figuratively “revived” later, but this cartoon does represent the moment of his death, because it is the moment when death becomes a part of Takeshi. He walks around for a year under death’s spell, before he knows for sure that Sister Rochelle’s “cure” for him has worked. In this, he is like the ghostly/not “Thanatoids”, who we shall meet later.

But his is not the only story where an encounter with a representative of the state apparatus makes the protagonist cartoonish. Hector’s as-yet-unsuccessful “courtship” of Zoyd, trying to seduce him into informing on his marijuana-grower friends, was “a romance, over the years, at least as persistent and Sylvester and Tweety’s” (22), observes the narrator. Both Hector, with his “tubal” addiction and his over-ambitious attempts to produce a film of Frenesi’s life, and Zoyd, who is forced by Brock Vond and media convention to annually repeat a stunt at a remove from reality (it is to prove mental disability for his social security, and to help Vond observe him) act like cartoons at times. However, what this comparison does is not simply call the characters a cartoon, but to suggest that living in the sort of “FBI state” depicted in the novel, a totalitarian state of “snitch”-lead social control (Hayles 1994, 19), is similar to living within a cartoon.

Once again here is an ambivalence about cartoons. Living in a totalitarian environment seems to be akin to living within a cartoon, and yet characters in which the narrative invests the most hope, such as DL, Prairie and Weed Atman, are identified with cartoons as well. This fact opens up a group of questions. Are cartoons, then, merely red-herrings, apparently rebellious identities that ultimately lead back to the “structure”, the “system” they started out rebelling against? Or do “cartoons” enable a postmodernism

of the preterite, a demystification, a political tool and/or “identity” that can make the “system” “vanish[...] frightened, into the desert” (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 535). If they do, how do they achieve this while avoiding the pitfalls of the system’s maintenance techniques?

This is a major question this thesis will address, and comes out of the preceding demonstration that cartoons have both literary and political functions in Pynchon’s novels. This combination opens out an interface between cartoons, postmodernism and politics, and does this in part by problematising the very distinction between literature and reality that cartoons of all things should reinforce. I gave some examples of the texts of two of the three novels directly referring to or attempting to affect the reality of the reader in the world. I also showed how the novels not only sport many references to cartoons, but support readings that claim they are cartoons themselves. At the same time, these novels, like the exemplary postmodern texts they are, undermine the possibility of a simple, non-aestheticised signified, the “reality” of the world they refer to however obtusely. At the same time, they appear to recognise that the elusive “real world” is the place in which political action takes place and needs to be located, and in some ways privileges it accordingly. There is a level upon which these are not endlessly self-referring fictions, because the political content of these novels suggests that a change in “actual political conditions” is one of drivers of the texts’ messages.

## Chapter two

### Preliminary: Politics

If cartoons provide an insight into the politics of these “postmodern” novels, why is that insight required? Why do Pynchon, Ellis and other postmodernist writers write cartoons into their texts? Clearly it is not a frivolous act for the writers under discussion: if they are merely incorporating references to cartoons and modes of characterisation likely to be considered cartoonish in order to blur the boundaries between high and popular culture, what is the purpose of this? Is it an entirely aesthetic act, a dialogue in form between themselves and other writers and academics (this is often seen as the purpose behind postmodern techniques – boundary blurring as a subversive act in itself), or does the problematizing of dichotomies have another purpose for some postmodern writers or effect for their readers?

I suggest that the question is one of politics within a postmodern setting. Postmodernism has a reputation for being apolitical. However, a number of apparently politically-minded writers have written in the mode. I believe Pynchon and Ellis pose questions about the limits of postmodernism for political writing. By extension, they pose questions about how politics can effectively engage a postmodern subject in a postmodern environment. I will also contend that both writers refute the claim of Fredric Jameson that Postmodernism is nothing but the cultural logic of late capitalism (c1991). Both acknowledge that fragmented, textualised, “hyperreal” postmodern environments can resemble and aid the hegemony of late capitalism that Jameson argues exists, but they also seem to be positing the possibility of significant resistances among its ruins. It may appear an oxymoron to argue that postmodernist writers engage with anything other than their own and others’ texts. However, both Pynchon and Ellis, despite, or perhaps more accurately because of, their use of postmodernist modes of representation, appear to hold a commitment to affecting a “reality” beyond the text at hand in the world of the reader. This “real world” may (or may not) be an extension of the textual world of the novel, and the lives we live as a part of our “real” day to day existence produced by acts of “reading” and “interpretation” in a broad sense. Even if it is not specified, the

spectacularised worlds both main authors portray suggest that interpretation is important for the lives of the characters, however. But both writers are able to connect popular culture, including the cartoons I shall focus on, with the existence of non-democratic power in American society, and perhaps also with the possibility of resisting that power.

If I said that Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* is unmistakably political, it would fly in the face of the book's history in society: many critics have failed to see the novel's politics in their initial rush to condemn (or often, defend) it. Obviously, this makes the book (the object) political, the object of political action of various sorts. However, even among the novel's opponents, some critics such as Laura Tanner (1994) appeared to recognise what Ellis was attempting to do, even if they felt he had failed<sup>1</sup>, or that the risks inherent in his strategy outweighed the possible benefits, or that his attempt or approach to the problem of misogyny among the footsoldiers of high capital and privilege was simply wrongheaded. Opponents most typically felt that Ellis was aestheticising violence upon women, and making money from the act (see for instance Baxter and Craft, undated internet page). Defenders either cited the indeterminacy of the narrative to argue that its violence was a chimera, or defended Ellis's right to free speech. Few dared venture the possibility that Ellis was essaying a critical approach to American masculinity at a point during which a privileged (and in many ways very macho) capitalist class was ascendant, an approach with feminist applications even if it is unorthodox<sup>2</sup>.

My own experience with *American Psycho* is one of encountering an absolutely ambivalent implied author. On the one hand, the novel is, as Young puts it, "a classic text at the end of the high postmodern period" (122). In addition, there is considerable pleasure to be found in *American Psycho*'s black sendup of the mores of New York's stockbrokers of the late 1980s – it is a very funny book in places. On the other hand, the voice of the implied author is at the same time palpably angry. The tone of the novel's voice, and the savagery with which it ridicules its characters, suggests disgust at the characters and events the novel portrays. This bleeds through

---

<sup>1</sup> Tanner felt that any potential critique of 1980s capitalism and masculinity the novel offered was fatally undercut by the tyranny of a narrative that didn't allow sure grounds for an oppositional interpretation.

<sup>2</sup>For an overview of the critical and public reception the novel was offered, see Young (1992); Freccero (1997). Price (1998) provides a welcome exception to my generalization.

at every turn: the implied author is perceptively outraged at his or her understanding of these mores, enough so that they create a grotesque version of the society they observe and then infuse that grotesque with a minute realism, one that penetrates down to the blood, bone and sinews. The readers' faces are rubbed in the gory details inside the exaggeration. The voice wants us to know that unchecked power by any class, but in this case a corporate one, tends to be exercised randomly on bodies in the most violent manner imaginable.

Pynchon's "counterculture politics"

Although the congruence of cartoons and politics is vital to reading *American Psycho*, it is in the two Pynchon novels that a complex theoretical connection between these two worlds is made. However, before I explore the significance of cartoon references in Pynchon's novels, I think it would be helpful to discern Pynchon's basic political stance, or as much of it as is possible with a writer of such complexity and ambivalence. I can then place these speculations into a theoretical context that helps construct politically informed readings of the cartoon references. Throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon's implied author conspicuously sides with the "passed over" masses, ignored and/or exploited by "elect" economic masters of commodities and markets. In *Vineland*, these preterite elements are all the people persecuted for past political mis-affiliations and present marijuana usage in an America the novel accuses of neo-fascism. But "preterition" here is implicitly extended to the citizens of America in general, people denied the democratic heritage they still believe exists there. Pynchon's politics can therefore be characterised as anti-fascist; indeed, his preferences seem to bear a resemblance to what has become known in recent political theory as "radical democracy".

Pynchon seems to belong to what we may broadly describe as "The American Left", his politics stemming from the radical activism of the 1960s and before. David Seed, for instance, writes that "there is a clear bias through [*Gravity's Rainbow*] against exploitative systems" (1988, 186). John Dugdale comments, "The Pynchon of *GR* is a political dissident writing his novel while his country is at war" [*sic*] (1990, 4), while Robert Sklar notes Pynchon's "revolutionary political inclinations", describing *The Crying of Lot 49* as "an anarchist miracle" (1978, 95). M. Keith Brooker (1993) identifies Pynchon's interests in "leftist politics" (albeit reasons for

their failure) in America, but suggests that the writer is still committed to making a version of leftist politics succeed (98). And Jeffrey S. Baker (1993) explores Pynchon's advocacy of a participatory democracy based upon the political theories of John Dewey. James S. Hans believes that *Gravity's Rainbow's* "portrayal of the horrors of the system is more than enough to convince one that something is seriously wrong with the way our society constitutes itself" (1988, 267), but also that Pynchon "not only lays bare the viciousness and emptiness of our structures in wide-ranging clarity, but also points to the way out of the black hole we have created for ourselves..." (267). Baker believes this way is democracy, in which provisional alliances are "knit and undone" (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 291) and "ad-hoc arrangements" are made (Baker, 105). Certainly this seems to tally with the stated aims of the Counterforce, "a nation... that will survive no longer than you or I, a common movement at the mercy of death and time: the ad-hoc adventure" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 706).

Pynchon does build a powerful case against the mysterious personnel who have power in the international economic system. This is because, despite the many flights of fancy *Gravity's Rainbow* indulges in, and whatever its departures from or allegiances with historical truth may be, Pynchon uses the cartel they form as an allegory for non-democratically-affirmed power, and sees its negative impact as being structural. The cartel, it should be noted, is an example of a "hegemony" as it is developed in Laclau and Mouffe (1985 – see the discussion below [41-3]). The existence of such a hegemony developing oppressive power shouldn't be read as a perversion of Laclau and Mouffe's ideas about radical democracy; they are clear, as I will show, about the possibility an "open political horizon" leading to totalitarianism. Pynchon's narrative of the "octopus" cartel has its basis in fact<sup>3</sup>, and is largely centred around the major German corporation, IG Farben, although it also traces IG's relationships with companies such as Ciba Geigy, ICI and Shell. The octopus's mission, it would seem, is to acquire new holdings, especially technological ones, and to grow until its power and influence outgrows the Earth itself. Those who control "IG", which ultimately in *Gravity's Rainbow* is synecdochal for all multinational

---

<sup>3</sup>Pynchon's main source for the information he presents is Richard Sasuly, *IG Farben* (New York: Boni and Gaer, 1947). See the various discussions in Weisenburger (1988).



corporate entities<sup>4</sup>, sit very much among Pynchon's "elect", the "massively moneyed" (713) "elite" (164), with links to the Nazi "corporate state" (ibid; 419). "Their" system requires a form of totalitarian control, has the same aims as capitalist corporate organisation, and is extremely destructive: "Taking and not giving back, demanding that 'productivity' and 'earnings' keep on increasing with time, the System removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity – most of the world, animal, vegetable and mineral, is laid waste in the process" (412), the narrator tells us.

"They" are responsible for the plummeting rocket. This is Weissmann's project, and he is rewarded by Them with a position among "the successful academics, the Presidential advisers, the token intellectuals who sit on boards of directors" (749). Pynchon comments that, in searching for Weissmann's fate, we should "[l]ook high, not low" (ibid). As a Jesuit Priest notes during a sermon in the Zone, "[o]nce the technological means of control have reached a certain size, a certain degree of *being connected* one to another, the chances of freedom are over for good" (539, Pynchon's italics). Their absolute power will bring with it a "Rocket State": a form of "fascism" imposed as "structure" from a rarefied space high above, just like the rocket itself. The rocket itself, of course, stands for "system", a providential structure of knowledge that assumes that events have a pre-destined end according to over-arching laws. Examples of how this thinking operates can be found in Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia, where discourses about the destiny of the German people and the Russian proletariat respectively lead to highly destructive totalitarian politics, because the end of that destiny justified what means it took to achieve it (see Arendt 1963).

Pynchon can be characterised as "anti-systemic", opposed to all closed systems but particularly in this context corporate capitalism, which he regards as potentially totalitarian in a similar manner to wartime Germany and the U.S.S.R. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, capitalist structures, as with fascism, are imposed from above for the benefit of untouchable interests who are out of the reach of their victims. This

---

<sup>4</sup>Pynchon's observations increasingly have a contemporary corollary, as recent years have seen a proliferation of titles such as Korten (1995), and an emergent "anti-globalization" movement that seems to be organizing as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) might have predicted. This also has affinities with the participatory democracy argued for by Baker (1993).

imposition seems to be total – there is no apparent escape from its logic. As such, the system is racked with dangers that the people living in it cannot change or avoid, as with other totalitarian systems. The implication in Pynchon is that all “closed” systems tend in this direction. “Living inside the system”, his narrator tells us, “is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide... though he’s amiable enough, keeps cracking jokes back through the loudspeaker [...] you catch a glimpse of his face, his insane, committed eyes, and you remember then, for a terrible few heartbeats, that of course it will end for you in blood, in shock, without dignity but there is meanwhile this trip to be on...” (412-13).

*“Structure” is structured in binary fashion*

I will outline Jacques Derrida’s philosophy here because it forms the basis of the radical democracy of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and because it seems to make sense of Pynchon’s own politics. This is based around Derrida’s critique of dichotomies, or binary divisions. Much of Derrida’s philosophy attacks what he describes as “the metaphysics of presence”, which is the unproven assumption in Western philosophy that the only philosophically legitimate category of existence is that which is present. In a series of books in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Derrida developed and used what has come to be known as “deconstruction” to read major canonical philosophical works. Because canonical philosophy was very influential in setting out ideas about the nature of reality, and people’s relationship to it, deconstruction also provides a way of understanding the way people construct reality itself.

Very broadly, deconstruction is a method of reading whereby the structure of a text, invariably structured in binary fashion, is revealed, the hierarchy of its terms reversed, and then displaced, or made impossible to sustain. Thus meaning is revealed to be the pre-determined product of a structure rather than transparent and original communication from an author to a reader. To do this, the reader must find an aporia in the text. This is a point in a text where the grounds for its meaning become contradictory and its meaning becomes radically unstable. To Derrida, because meaning in a text is based on a set of metaphysical assumptions, each reading of a text has aporia. Here, the presence of the text, what it wants to mean, so to speak, comes to depend on the binary, hierarchical structure of language rather than a

relationship between language and the world. This means that the signifier and signified were not related in any necessary way. An aporia is similar to an unresolvable paradox, but differs from a dialectical structure because the tension the contradiction produces is not resolved by a synthesis of the two opposing terms. Instead, every claim to communicate truth is revealed to communicate a structure, to be a product of language. Derrida also claims that language exists prior to reality in human experience: while an extra-linguistic reality exists, there is no way of accessing it except through the mediations of language and interpretation. As such, all of our perceptions about reality are structured like language, that is, dichotomously, in binary fashion. This is because meaning privileges what is perceivable, what is present or “there”, over what is absent. But, Derrida demonstrates, this privilege, common-sensical as it might seem, is unsustainable. Jonathan Culler summarises the argument succinctly:

[a]mong the familiar concepts that depend on the value of presence are: the immediacy of sensation, the presence of ultimate truths to a divine consciousness, the effective presence of an origin in a historical development, a spontaneous or unmediated intuition, the transumption of thesis and antithesis in a dialectical synthesis, the presence in speech of logical and grammatical structures, truth as what subsists behind appearances, and the effective presence of a goal in the steps that lead to it. The authority of presence, its power of valorisation, structures all our thinking. The notions of “making clear” “grasping”, “demonstrating”, “revealing”, and “showing what is the case” all invoke presence. To claim, as in the Cartesian *cogito*, that the “I” resists radical doubt because it is present to itself in the act of thinking or doubting is one sort of appeal to presence. Another is the notion that the meaning of an utterance is what is present to the consciousness of the speaker, what he or she “has in mind” at the moment of utterance.... (Culler, 1983, 93-94)

Here the issue has been the hierarchical opposition presence/absence. A deconstruction would involve the demonstration that for presence to function as it is said to, it must have the qualities that supposedly belong to its opposite, absence. Thus, instead of defining absence in terms of presence, as *its* negation, we can treat presence as the effect of a generalised absence.... (95)

A presence is structured by its difference to what could be but is not there (present) – it is structured by the trace of what it is different from. This is how something signifies or means: its meaning depends upon its difference from what it does not mean. As Culler explains,

If a cave man is successfully to inaugurate language by making a special grunt signify “food”, we must suppose that the grunt is already distinguished from other grunts and that the world has already been divided into the categories “food” and “nonfood”. Acts of signification depend on differences, such as the contrast between “food” and “nonfood” that allows food to be signified, or the contrast between signifying elements that allows a sequence to function as a signifier. The sound sequence *bat* is a signifier because it contrasts with *pat*, *mat*, *bad*, *bet*, etc. The noise that is “present” when one says “bat” is inhabited by the traces of forms one is not uttering, and it can function as a signifier only insofar as it consists of such traces. (96)

Hence the meaning of the utterance is actually partly absent from that utterance: a fully-present meaning cannot exist, because in this way it would be “absent” as well. Presence, then, can be found elsewhere from where it is. To then assert such full presence is an act of the negation of those traces of absence that partially defines it.

*Traces, palimpsests and wrong paths taken*

In *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Vineland*, Pynchon examines “official history” and structure imposed from above, and finds that it deprives people and groups of their reality or even their existence. This deprivation is often systematic. In *Vineland*, Frenesi’s family are “bumped off the computer” of the FBI “to make way for the next generation” of informers (352). In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the “preterite” are shown to be erasable, “poor human palimpsests” (50), those passed over by official history, or History, the Providence that oppresses them. Their life stories are rubbed out and written over by the stories of those whose power renders them significant, but because the preterite are “palimpsests”, a trace remains of their whispered lives. In the passage this phrase comes from this trace is associated with nature, with living in real human bodies: “shivering under their government blankets, drugged, drowning in tears and snot of grief so real, torn from so deep it surprises...” (50, my ellipsis). Hence Pynchon often tries to convey a sense of the “reality” of those considered unimportant to the elect and their structures and war; the dead matter of “thousands of old used toothpaste tubes” (130) in the midst of vast war construction, is given life through histories and memory of everyday existence:

[...] thousands of children who pestled foam up out of soft mortars of mouths, who lost easily a thousand times as many words among the chalky bubbles – bed-going complaints, timid announcements of love, news of fat or translucent, fuzzy or gentle beings from the country under the counterpane – uncounted soapy-liquorice moments spat and flushed down to sewers and the slow-scumming grey estuary, the morning mouths growing with the day tobacco and fish-furred, dry with fear, foul with idleness, flooded at thoughts of impossible meals, settling instead for the week's offal in gland pies, Household Milk, broken biscuits at half the usual points, and isn't menthol a marvellous invention to take just enough of it away each morning...(130)

This trace is the trace of "real" lives, rendered "realistically" in Pynchon's text. Yet this realism, as with the paranoia inherent in Slothrop's story, is not unmitigated. Contact with Them may have erased the preterite, but it also made them textual, palimpsests, so that even by rendering their stories and existence, Pynchon still only uncovers textual existences. But if They have reduced or even cancelled people's "reality" by making them textual (and by extension aesthetic) before covering them over completely, Pynchon seems to be essaying a text that gives space for their real, bodily existence once again. The recognition that within accounts of history are real bodies underpins Pynchon's attitude toward history and the lost promise he sees in America, the existence of a "path not taken".

In Pynchon's work, alternative roads invariably steer history into the realm in which people lead lives dedicated to the here and now instead of to some overarching structure. The feminist Genesis myth that Sister Rochelle constructs in *Vineland* provides a good example of this (166). Rochelle imagines a Garden of Eden in which the "real" original humans, Eve and Lilith, once existed in a state of Utopia. It was only the arrival of Adam that introduced both sin and the providential plan. E. Shaskan Bumaz makes the point that with this and other feminised masculinist myths in the novel, Pynchon suggests that Utopia ended with the transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society (166-7). As Sister Rochelle herself tells Takeshi, "It was sleazy, slippery man... who invented 'good' and 'evil', where before women had been content to just be" (*Vineland*, 166).

This myth has a counterpart in *Gravity's Rainbow*: Puritan America's official rejection of William Slothrop's heresy. William, Tyrone's direct ancestor, argued that the preterite has as much of a place in the divine order as the elect. The structure They, the elect, have set up is one which contains two main categories, with no existence independent of them. The elect ascend to heaven. The preterite are passed

over, consigned to hell for the simple crime of not being among the elect, and from within the system, there is no recognition of their otherness: it is a totality – all those who lie outside the system altogether are considered preterite as well. This binary logic meant that someone was either one thing or another, even if, in life, they did not know to which category they belonged. However, in what was potentially a turning point in Puritan theology, Slothrop wrote a pamphlet entitled “On Preterition”, for which he became something of an outcast. In this pamphlet he argued that the preterite were vital to the elect’s ascension because without their presence, as precisely those othered by the elect, there would be no election at all. This had dangerous implications for Puritan thought, as Steven Weisenburger notes: “William Pynchon’s argument implied that anyone might have access to divine grace, that Christ died for elect and preterite alike. And in thus opening the doors, it might even be necessary, as Thomas Pynchon writes three hundred years later, ‘to love Judas too’” (Weisenburger 238, *Gravity’s Rainbow* 555). His argument, broadly, recognises a trace of their respective other in both preterite and elect: he showed that, far from being clearly opposed to each other, these terms actually depend upon the existence of their opposite, rather than its rejection, for meaning. The elect could only have their divine status if they were “chosen” and another “passed over”. Therefore those “passed over” are as vital to the functioning of the system as those “elected”. Judas, for instance, enabled Christ’s martyrdom, and so was fulfilling God’s providential plan. William Slothrop’s heresy needed to be suppressed by the Puritans because it suggested an alternative to the binary structure elect/preterite, and so was a threat to Their privileged status as beneficiaries of the political realisation of the structure. Slothrop argues for a reconfigured preterition to occupy a middle space of both/and. This argument depurifies the system because now each term in it is tainted by the trace of its opposite. This rejection of purity (and hence “Puritanism”) is also a rejection of a systemic thinking that assimilates everything without exception.

For Pynchon, in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *The Crying of Lot 49* especially, binary thinking, the either/or of scientific, logical, and (frequently) political thought is the primary vehicle for the wrong-headedness that plagues twentieth-century power relations. It leaves the middle spaces that partake in both sides passed-over and unaccounted for. This is the “excluded middle” of *The Crying of Lot 49*, best seen when Oedipa Maas reflects on her confused state, her inability to discover the truth that keeps eluding her grasp of the “Tristero”:

[s]he had heard all about excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided; and how it had ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity? For it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless. Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would be either a transcendent meaning, or only the earth.... Ones and zeroes. So did the couples arrange themselves.... Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. (*The Crying of Lot 49*, 136-7)

All of these middle paths, negotiating the terrain between two pure illusions, the totally structured or the totally unstructured, have been, for Pynchon, forgotten and excluded, passed over by culture. As Tony Tanner suggests, in *Gravity's Rainbow* it is this passed-over territory that Pynchon encourages us to escape into:

[i]f we as readers try to win away one narrative "system" from the book, we are in danger of repeating mentally what They are doing in building the rocket. To put it in its most extreme form, They are trying to reduce all of nature's self-renewing variety to one terminal rocket; we must avoid the temptation to reduce the book to one fixed meaning. This is why our reading should be paranoid and anti-paranoid, registering narrative order and disorder, experiencing both the determinate and the indeterminate, pattern and randomness, renewing our awareness of our acts and interpretations as being both conditioned and free, and of ourselves as synthesising and disintegrating systems. In this way we can to some extent be released from the system-Zone bind which besets Pynchon's main characters.... (Tanner 1982, 82-3)

This "paranoid/anti paranoid" reading employs the logic the system passes over rather than dominant systemic logic, for it is the latter which produces the bind Tanner speaks of. As a passed-over logic, the former is associated with preterition. Since preterition involves the system's other, it seems appropriate that the totalising system Pynchon depicts should pass over such muddy and blurred logic as both/and. The Preterite, of course, exist in this excluded middle. They are not zeroes, despite what the elect would prefer: Pynchon's descriptions of them give them a sombre reality.

Systemic closure is given a spatial/geographic metaphor in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Here, the System inscribes over wild space by fencing it, erasing or expelling "preterite" wildness as it passes over it. This is set out most strikingly in the section backgrounding the group of Argentinean anarchists lead by Francisco Squalidozzi. This group align themselves with unfenced spaces. In their foundation myth, as Buenos Aires attempts to gain hegemony over Argentina's provinces, more and more

of Argentina's vast plainland became fenced, to allow the frontier of "society" to expand. This expansion was accompanied by the extermination of the plains' preterite elements, the Indians conquered or driven away as the fences moved outward. Thus, a process of territorialisation took place as the elect organisers of society expanded their influence. Squalidozzi's revolutionary project aims to restore Argentina's wild spaces, in all their wilderness, the "original clean sheet of paper" (Hans, 268), a project Hans describes as "naive" (ibid). He suggests that Squalidozzi's desired return to absolute nature is not something Pynchon would support: "Pynchon is not nearly naive enough to wish for the (impossible) unstructured world of anarchist freedom. People code the world as a matter of course..." (270). This freedom is too impossibly purist, excluding the middle ground of provisional "ad-hoc" coding.

As with William Slothrop's heresy, it is the middle space, seen by elect elements as somehow polluted or impure because it is a hybrid, that resists the structure of either/or because it is revealed as both one thing and its other, and for this Pynchon provisionally affords it preferential treatment. The Zone is associated with anarchism: it is a space the War has temporarily deterritorialised. This is what is most likely to have attracted Squalidozzi to it. Because of this, on the one hand, as far as They are concerned, the process of its official reterritorialisation must begin quickly – hence, for instance, the armies and governments of all the major war participants, including Germany, desperately trying to neutralise a group of Herero soldiers at large in the Zone. On the other hand, the fact that the borders are down so radically represents an opportunity to build an alternative society, take an alternative path, and reconstruct a world less dependent upon purity, and the opposites that define existence according to election and preterition. This opportunity to radically democratise the Zone and to prevent a return to Their dominance depends, though, upon the formulation of a way to overcome the tendency of structure to become an end in itself, for the "ad-hoc" and the provisional to become an institution that then defends its existence.

#### *An alternative to systems*

*Gravity's Rainbow* favours openness; enclosure of meaning, even in accusation, partakes in the very systemic impulses it argues against. This is arguably



the driving assumption behind Pynchon's generation of postmodern writers. It begs the question, though, of whether he can say anything at all in response to a system that enforces closure and therefore makes closure and violence the same thing. How can there be a political critique that apparently eschews the tools it must use to form effective politics?

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, there is always a sense that Pynchon is creating meaning while at once denying readers certainty in that meaning. For instance, paranoia is a major theme in the novel, but it also penetrates the narrative method: reading this novel and establishing meaning from it are, according to the frame of reference the novel sets up, paranoid acts<sup>5</sup>. Paranoia is described by the narrator as "a puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible" (188). Mackey (1981) suggests that "as preterition, language is innately paranoid" (27), and Siegel suggests that "[t]he narrator wants his participation in the fictional process to be recognised, because his narrative is an exercise in Creative Paranoia, a conscious construction of possible We- and They- systems" (21). By seeing reading this way, the novel's assertions are mitigated, and an alternative totality of meaning to the "official", "authorial" one is thwarted. Pynchon does not assert the "real truth", but tells instead a "truth...not", a general direction framed by an unwillingness to close the play of meaning, clouding any closure with suspicion engendered by paranoia. Even when Pynchon seems to be saying things relatively directly, such as when he traces Their manipulations of Slothrop (the scientific experiments on him as an infant and Their continued monitoring of him into adulthood) he undercuts the very plausibility his narrative builds. Sometimes he allows his narrator to go too far, to spill "irrationally" over into paranoia with his or her speculations. There is one such moment when Slothrop learns that president Roosevelt has died: "... but Roosevelt was *his* president, the only one he'd known. It seemed he'd just keep getting elected, term after term, forever. But somebody had decided to change that. So he was put to sleep, Slothrop's president, quiet and neat..." (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 374). Narrative tactics such as this make a powerful political point in themselves, one implicit in the deconstructive critique of fully present meaning. They recognise that the act of reading is paranoid in a similar manner to this, that it involves leaps in the dark or in

---

<sup>5</sup> There have been a number of readings of paranoia as a theme and a method in *Gravity's Rainbow*. An early one, Siegel (1978) is excellent, and the best is possibly Bersani (1989).

the half-light. This is especially so in a difficult novel that rarely offers its readers transparent prose. These leaps are coupled in the novel with other tactics such as an apparently unquestioning acceptance of the supernatural and other “irrational” forces, and they lead readers to distance their absolute trust in the narrator, creating an implied injunction to never totally close down “other”, even “irrational”, possibilities.

So, at the very least, Pynchon seems interested in the *possibility* of alternatives. In particular, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland* suggest the possibility of alternative Americas, a return to the promise of a land whose historical destiny did not have to lead down the road to the destruction of the multitude in the interests of the few. Pynchon has identified some places in history where other possibilities might have been realised. William Slothrop's heresy and the Zone were two of them, but their opportunity was never realised. Perhaps there may be another in the future.

A possible alternative might necessitate the abandonment of the structures of knowledge that contribute to the possibility of totalitarianism. The form of *Gravity's Rainbow* reflects the hope Pynchon sees in the Zone's clearance of the dichotomously structured ground of America: It resists the dichotomy of closed/ open meaning, and instead posits “open closure” (or vice-versa) in an untrustworthy text that nonetheless seems to be saying something. Pynchon writes:

[m]aybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of co-ordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without Preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up... (556)

Pynchon's hopes for the Zone revolve around it being denuded of polarities and reverting to unstructured space. Although this means that the Zone holds a potential for anarchist freedom, the problem is that to claim this freedom is to re-structure the territory in an either/or, elect/preterite binarism, only with the terms reversed. “Structure”, the tool of the Elect, would in these circumstances be passed over, and a barrier inappropriately set up (by barring structure one, ironically, reinscribes it). This would form the first part of a deconstruction: the reversal of the components in a binary structure. However, the existence of the Zone, and hence its revolutionary anarchist potential, is owed to a “celebration of markets” that forms the “true war” (105). To purify this non-structure, to fully inscribe the presence of non-structure,

would ignore the existence of an impurity: these enabling “markets”, reliant on structure as they are. This is, therefore, structure that can never, despite all, be escaped. Hence this Zonal road, the alternative to the route that leads to death’s providence, is neither totally structured nor completely unstructured. While there is no “destination” to this journey, (for this would imply an overarching plan), but there is, nonetheless, a place from which to start – there is “a single set of co-ordinates”, a location, so that one is not totally lost. For this, structure is a necessity, but it is incomplete structure. Possibilities for freedom rely, ironically, on any new system remaining incomplete.

### Radical democracy

The project of renewing America from a single set of co-ordinates bears strong resemblances to theories of participatory “radical” democracy, particularly ones that have emerged since the mid-1980s. These theories have utilised some important deconstructive tools. The discourses of “radical” democracy arose partly in response to the problems of orthodox political conflations of market capitalism with democracy (Mouffe 1992, 2-3; Lummis 1996, 17). It has been argued that Western Liberal democracy is too easily complicit in the reinscription of the power of capitalism, which itself is, at root, non-democratic, based as it is on the exploitation of “other” classes by capitalist interests, and the suppression of the exploited classes’ aspirations. Societies in the Western Liberal democratic mould such as the United States are usually only democratic insofar as they extend limited democratic rights to their populations (Lummis, 18-19). (Events at the 2000 U.S. Presidential election exposed some of the limitations of the U.S. electoral process, for instance). As Baker says, quoting from Docherty, “democracy has come to be seen simply as the ‘freedom to make a small hieroglyphic mark on a piece of paper some twenty occasions in a normal human lifetime’” (Baker, 124). Pynchon appears to have sympathy with these arguments. Certainly, he points fingers at United States governments in *Vineland* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, suggesting that they have participated in a severe narrowing of democracy; a part of this is their complicity in what Pynchon characterises as a totalitarian version of capitalism.

To radicalise democratic life requires radicalising the political economy’s structure rather than its specific content: it involves not a political manifesto as such

(although these might be useful in the short term), but rather the enabling of a radical increase in democratic (political) participation by members of society. In contrast, most political systems are what might be called idealistic or utopian: they ultimately purport to end the necessity of politics and political conflict, settling difference in relation to a higher law, and therefore ending political agitation in favour of an administered relation to that law. Such a metanarrative might be, for example, the providential Marxian law of historical progress, the fascist law of blood and nation, religious texts, the primacy of economics and the free market, or simply the ideal of “common sense” consensus politics, all of which provide authority for a system of administration. These metanarratives always have the potential to totalise.

This illusion of a higher law is similar to the illusion of a “providential plan” characterising Their ideology in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Instead, radically democratic politics keeps contest and antagonism alive, so that the closure totality politics enforces is always thwarted by a constant legitimisation of various antagonisms within the system that must be suppressed to enact its closure. Derrida once wrote of “a democracy to come” (1991), as if it will never arrive, or does not exist. Simon Critchley made a similarly Derridian argument when he wrote that “democracy does not exist... one must not restrict oneself to conceiving democracy as an existing political form (and, once again, certainly not as an apologetics for Western liberal democracy). Rather, one must begin to think of democracy as a task, or project to be attempted... to extend the democratic franchise to all areas of public and private life” (1992, 240). Both these statements follow the logic of the “absent centre” that is typical of Derrida – democracy can never be made fully present, it can never be completed, or have the final answer, for once social antagonisms have been resolved, a negation of the political other, the opposition that democracy requires, has taken place.

So, to assert the “arrival” of democracy is to conflate a non-, or only semi-democratic system with “democracy” itself. “Democracy” remains elsewhere at each point it is made apparent, as any instance of empowerment negates, or as Laclau and Mouffe would put it, “sutures over” other instances of non- or dis-empowerment that themselves must be addressed. For radical democracy, the process of undermining full political presence can never end. An end to this process will be, by definition, outside the borders of democracy. Once the hierarchical opposition or binary structure has been deconstructed, it is not enough to simply privilege the formerly

suppressed term (democracy) over the formerly dominant one (non-democracy), because then “democracy” would attain full presence and suppress its other to do so. Instead, the binary structure itself must be displaced and reimaged, democracy a descriptor of the process of continually teasing out what is undecideable, what limits full presence, from the decision to favour one path over another.

Poststructuralist theory such as Derrida’s is used as a tool by some theorists of radical democracy. C. Douglas Lummis notes that radical democracy is “the end point of [the method of deconstruction as practised by Jacques Derrida and other postmodern theorists]. Similarly a follower of Michel Foucault would be adding no new information in revealing that radical democracy is “really” about power: of course it is about power. On the contrary, the Foucauldian critique of society as a system of reified power over the people is a critique (rather than simply the observation of a sociophysicist) only from the standpoint of radical democracy” (Lummis, 166-7n3). One of the most compelling theorisations of radical democracy is posited in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) (further elaborated and defended in Laclau’s *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* [1990], *The Making of Political Identities* [1994], and Mouffe’s *Dimensions of Radical Democracy* [ed, 1992] and *The Return of the Political* [1993]). Here, the authors identify a tradition latent within Marxism, based on the writings of Antonio Gramsci. In their formulation, Laclau and Mouffe provocatively detach the possibility of political action from its heretofore-essential locus, the working class. In Marxist thought, the working class is determined by the conditions of production, a determination which is at its base economic, and based on inevitable historical processes. In other words, Marxist discourse “objectively” identifies the destiny of the working class (the subjects of a revolutionary consciousness which will eventually overthrow the existing relations of production) in the working class *because* it is the working class. In such a claim, Laclau and Mouffe contend, Marxism is an essentialist discourse, closed to other analyses and competing claims (such as those from nuclear or feminist criticism).

Contrary to the orthodox meaning of the word today, which implies a bland social sameness, in Laclau and Mouffe “hegemony” refers to a connection between discourses, which then opens out a discursive field. One possible hegemonic relationship, for instance, might be between a political group agitating against the impact of industrialised food production on the third world and a group protesting

genetic engineering in food. Although the overall aims of the two groups may differ, they coincide on some fronts, and at these points a hegemony can be constructed. This does not cancel out the points of difference between the groups, however, and so the discursive field remains open (those differences remain in play), rather than closed (where the differences are covered up). Essential and hierarchical social systems presupposed what they call a “sutured” social space, a space sewn together around privileged points of political action. This would happen if the anti-genetic engineering group was to be subsumed into the larger anti-food industry group, even though the former is not necessarily opposed to food industrialism *per se*. Similarly, if it were assumed that food industry opponents were the inevitable locus of anti-industrial activity generally (we all have to eat, after all), and that the fulfilment of all this group’s aims would settle other antagonisms (such as an anti-genetic engineering concern) then the discursive field would become a closed one, all its antagonisms sutured over, with politics gathered at this privileged point, and the remainder of the field resembling a solid, pristine front. Laclau and Mouffe believe that political action is best served by provisional, hegemonic relations rather than privileged, essential ones. Groups comprising this type of hegemony are neither totally indeterminate, nor are they identifiable by way of any innate condition.

To Laclau and Mouffe, current official democratic practices should be deepened toward plurality, “an expansion of the democratic revolution in new directions” (1985, 158), where radically democratic practice can take hold. This allows for relationships between different groups geared toward specific goals. Once those goals have been achieved, however, the difference between them will allow them to retain their own identity. If, for instance, a revolutionary movement made up of a hegemony of various preterite interests were able to neutralise their influence in the Zone, then at that point the direction of the new society would be radically open. One possibility is that the hegemony will harden into a firm body that begins to suture over its internal antagonisms and differences, thus closing the political field as it consolidates its power. The Zone would then have rulers, who might silence opposition using repressive tactics. The cartel of corporate entities comprising “Them” or “The Firm” in *Gravity’s Rainbow* are exactly such a hegemony in power. On the other hand, from the open field, the hegemony may then revert to its

constituent parts, keeping differences and antagonisms in play and therefore potentially leaving room for the influence of other groups and hegemonies<sup>6</sup>. As such, labour would be required to keep necessary differences in operation: “‘once more an effort’, as Derrida has recently noted, this is the germ of democracy” (Critchley, 240). Social and political relations would remain in changing states of hybridity, as this labour would aim at maintaining social identifications that survive yet never complete themselves.

### What use is postmodernism?

These concerns confront “postmodern” political theories on several fronts. The first point Ernesto Laclau confronts himself: “since there is ultimate undecidability”, he writes, “and, as a result, no immanent tendency of the structure to closure and full presence [the enabling factor for radical democracy since it negates the truth of historical “laws”], closure has to be *artificially* brought about from the outside. In that way a case for totalitarianism can be presented starting from deconstructive premises. Of course, the totalitarian argument would be as much a non sequitur as the argument for democracy: either direction is equally possible given the situation of structural undecidability” (1995, 93). This, too, would appear to be the case in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. That totalitarianism *and* radical democracy can both be formed from deconstructive premises is the most important point to note here. Democratic hegemonies open out political spaces, clearing ground for oppositional discourses. The moment the political ground is cleared sufficiently by democratic labour to deepen the democratic tradition, though, the possibility re-emerges of essentialist discourses re-establishing themselves around the vacuum that results. Depending on the tolerance of the ascendant essentialist discourse to the inessential, totalistic and even totalitarian politics can result. *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s Zone plays this spatial metaphor out exactly. The loss of the certainties provided by a central, guiding essentialism could produce a state of chaos, whereupon a strong, essentialist (for this is stronger than anti-essentialism, in the traditional sense) politics could easily reassert itself as a response to the “crisis” of chaos. It would do this by appealing to the

---

<sup>6</sup> This should not be taken to imply that behind “Their” cartel’s mysterious surface contestation over position and influence don’t occur. They are merely irrelevant to the preterite because whoever is in

nostalgia for strong forms created at the confusion and terror caused by their loss. This essentialist politics could become totalitarianism if the chaotic “democratic” space is repressed fully wherever it is formed. In this sense, totalitarianism is *stronger* than democracy, and in times of crisis strength can easily become seen as a greater virtue than freedom.

This relates to another major charge levelled against the political potential of postmodernism, that the radical potential of cultural fragmentation is illusory. Instead, postmodernism has become or has always been the domain of corporate interests because, to use Fredric Jameson’s definition, postmodernism is “the cultural logic of late capitalism” (c1991). What postmodern fragmentation does instead is fragment the forces opposed to the dominant system, weakening them (Le Blanc, 1995; Zavarzadeh, 1995). Hence, the argument might conclude, postmodern notions of “difference” have ultimately weakened any basis for emancipatory activity because rather than all forms of advancement being achieved under the same banner – the working class – struggles are now proceeding under many banners: race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so forth, each of these fragmenting into sub-groups of difference as well. The traditional, Marxist notion is that the interests of the working class are universal, and so once it overthrows bourgeois ownership and takes the tools of labour back, thus undoing the alienating effects of capitalism, the false consciousness of ideology which characterises existence under capitalism will fall away, and the kind of ideological pressures that have come to oppress groups such as workers, women, gays and lesbians, people of colour and so forth will cease to exist. If, on the other hand, a hegemony of these interested groups were to prompt a revolution, its inherent fragmentation, and hence its non-universal character, would prevent it from transcending ideology.

The supposedly radical postmodern notion of unlimited play has similarly been criticised for undermining the possibility of political resistance. Radical freeplay, the continued slippage of discourse involving the “play” of language, allows no grounds upon which to fight, and thus renders itself impotent. Critchley notes about Derrida that “there is an impasse of the political in Derrida’s work” (236). Beardsworth (1996) disagrees, however, and Critchley himself sees “a way out of this impasse by following the moment from ethics to politics in Levinas’ work (Critchley,

---

control of Their hegemony will continue to pass over the interests of the preterite, by definition.



ibid). Nonetheless, the argument that postmodernism and deconstruction's political impasse is terminal is popular. According to it, any anti-capitalist grounding is immediately undermined, deconstructed and made impossible because the politically interested party cannot legitimately make a decision and enforce it. According to the "radical" position they take up, its critics charge, meaning is so transient (and linked to "bourgeois" notions of pleasure and playing) that they cannot come to any legitimate and practical understanding of their opposition (Zavarzadeh). The opponents of postmodernism reduce its position to one of moral/political relativism. If there are no grounds for anything, this position would argue, how can we say exploiting people is wrong? How can we condemn Patrick Bateman's acts of torture and murder in *American Psycho*? The temptation to say "murder is wrong" would have to be accompanied by an exploration and a demystification of the politics of that statement: it is the assertion of a power position in which ideas of rightness are contingent on moral, historical and ideological constructs rather than any sort of truth. How would the power we exercise condemning Bateman be any more moral than the power Bateman exercises over his "other"?

Pynchon makes equivalent criticisms in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland*. James Hans has already noted that Pynchon does not favour Squalidozzi's anarchist purity, one of the novel's equivalents to unlimited play (270). Slothrop's quest is a warning, as Baker notes, against the "mindless pleasures" of the novel's working title (106). Because of those pleasures, and Slothrop's susceptibility to them, his escape from the Firm is entirely personal, and has no wide political import. They are not effected by Slothrop's isolated scattering; the Counterforce are divided over what Slothrop's role should be, but as far as they are concerned, it will not be until many more people have set aside their They-induced structural identities that the Counterforce can succeed. *Gravity's Rainbow* makes each criticism of various resistances to Them that have been levelled against "radical" postmodern politics. The Counterforce's failure is partly due to their fragmentation; a consensus is never reached over the symbolic meaning of Slothrop. It is suggested that this ambiguous, contested space, which is akin to various deconstructive terms such as difference or the trace, reinforces or even enables the totalitarian elect. *Vineland*'s Brock Vond easily undermines the novel's democratic movements, and puts their members to work for a neo-fascist establishment instead. He recognises the "desire for order" among his enemies, their fear of unstructured space. And the failure of Slothrop's

resistances against the Firm is a result of his addiction to “mindless pleasures”, to a free-play of identity rather than a stable but oppositional political identity.

All of this seems only to offer a choice of structure, if the politics opposed to the totalitarian system are to be successful, or the weakness of deconstructed identity. It is to address this double-bind that Pynchon introduces cartoons into the novels, and at times seems to write the narratives *as* cartoons. The mode-of-existence of cartoons provides Pynchon with a theoretical knowledge of how to effectively establish a democratic politics in the face of a totalitarian system without that force being either far too weak to be of any consequence beyond isolated acts of kindness, or being co-opted and integrated by and into the system itself. This way out is related to a politics of the “excluded middle” rather than the inside/outside, preterite/elect politics of the System. This, I believe, may answer concerns regarding the political effectiveness of postmodernist or poststructuralist politics.

Both of Pynchon’s novels address the failure of resistant strategies thus far. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* the Counterforce becomes structured and fails (as we shall see). In *Vineland* the new generation that could form a revolutionary consciousness seem more interested in commercialising their punk anarchism – Isaiah plans to build an amusement park with violence as its theme – than realising the revolutionary potential of punk. Nonetheless there *is* potential, there are paths of resistance that have not yet been taken. In both books that potential lies in an unrealised radically democratic revolution – projects that They cannot corrupt because they remain dangerous. The students at College of the surf made “the basic revolutionary mistake” (229) and invested in Weed Atman as leader and father figure. Their need for such a centre is one such desire for order that Vond exploits. Weed, in addition, was not a perfect leader. But Weed was originally chosen for a reason: he was one of the people, a figure of the “out-of-control” that characterised the revolt. He preached humane revolution, and this attitude was never corrupted. It is only exhaustion (perhaps coupled with Weed’s lack of focus) that reduces his answer to the constant question he’s asked, “how about picking up the gun?” (229). Initially he says it is “because in this country nobody in power gives a shit about any human life but their own. This forces us to be humane – to attack what matters more than life to the regime and those it serves, their money and their property” (229), but later the answer has become “it’s wrong because if you pick up a rifle, the Man picks up a machine gun, by the time you find some machine gun he’s all set up to shoot rockets, begin to see a pattern?”

(229). He may have thus regressed from attack to self-preservation, from theories of principle to those of power, but he still refuses the gun. The more “correct” and theorised revolutionary, Rex, was to “sell out” and take the gun when it was offered. Weed was the one, of course, killed by the official powers – for all his personal faults he represented the democracy that those in control cannot abide instead of the authoritarianism of Rex<sup>7</sup>.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the democratic hope is also *unfulfilled* rather than necessarily *unfulfillable*. The Counterforce did begin as a genuine resistance, and they had victories, however brief or ultimately inconsequential. When active, it was associated with preterition, and so stood for the emancipation of the oppressed. But such triumphs are always limited, they are never such that They cannot bounce back and assimilate the rebellious element into the system, using the “guy [in the] branch office in each of our brains” (712) to do so. This “guy” ultimately engineers our response to a situation which is undecidable, one in which ideology has temporarily lapsed: he knows we’d rather be comfortably ensconced in a situation of power: our ego would rather us whole and together, as a personality, separate from others. The chaotic, undecideable, “Zonal” moment blurs this separateness undermining the ego’s sense of itself as a totality. However, this “Zonal” moment of the Counterforce’s existence remains a token of possibility, if only it can avoid total closure, retain provisional structure within an open, democratic space. That is the “we” system the Counterforce theorises.

The “we” of *Gravity's Rainbow* is a response to one of the ultimate victories of the forces of totalisation. The rocket of humanity’s extinction really was poised to strike in 1973, and to a lesser (or perhaps just more complicated) extent it still is. This has the potential to unite all of humanity. Pynchon here makes a similar point about revolutionary consciousness to Ellis’s – that under a system approaching totality all of us are its potential victims. As victims of the Rocket-state, “we” are feminised, in opposition with the phallic Rocket: “the Rocket’s purely feminine counterpart” is “the zero point at the centre of its target” (223). As the audience of the Orpheus theatre at the end of the novel, we are thus gathered around the feminine

---

<sup>7</sup> It would, indeed, be quite wrong for the democracy to come to be represented by anything other than someone with personal faults; Slothrop is another instance. The fact that they are human beings who cannot entirely take control of their own lives (and over their own desires) contrasts the absolute control (over self and others) required by non-democratic people in power.

“zero point”; this puts us in a similarly prone position to the feminised, child-like herd creatures of *Vineland*. This is demonstrated in *American Psycho* as well: Bateman’s victims, for he is the rocket, are seen as suspiciously “feminine”. As we will see later, by taking on these “feminine” significations, “We” represent what those in power fear within themselves.

This is a meeting ground at which a community of interest is formed, one like *Vineland*’s ghostly Thanatoids, all having been killed unjustly. All the preterite, the victims and potential victims of the system, can form a “we” system. If that field contains enough of “us”, the revolution will succeed. Beyond this point, though, such a universalising “we” seems less justifiable, as, although useful tactically in a confrontation with totalitarian dominance, such a “we” does deny difference within the system, freezing it inside a hardened systemic exterior. As Pirate Prentice says, in a conversation with a baffled Roger Mexico,

“I mean what They and Their hired psychiatrists call ‘delusional systems.’ Needless to say, ‘delusions’ are always officially defined. We don’t have to worry about questions of real and unreal. They only talk out of expediency. It’s the *system* that matters. How the data arrange themselves inside it. Some are consistent, others fall apart. Your idea that Pointsman sent Gloaming takes a wrong fork. Without any contrary set of delusions – delusions about ourselves, which I’m calling a We-system – the Gloaming idea might have been all right”

“Delusions about ourselves?”

“Not real ones.”

“But officially defined.”

“Out of expediency, yes.”

“Well, you’re playing Their game, then.”

“Don’t let it bother you. You’ll find you can operate quite well. Seeing as we haven’t won yet, it isn’t really much of a problem.”

[...]

It’s a little bewildering – if this is a “We-system,” why isn’t it at least thoughtful enough to interlock in a reasonable way, like They-systems do?

“That’s exactly it,” Osbie screams[...] “*They’re* the rational ones. We piss on their rational arrangements. Don’t we... Mexico?”

“Hoorah!” cry the others. Well taken, Osbie. (638-9)

The major implication of this, of what Molly Hite calls “communally defined We-systems and paranoically conceived They-systems” (c1983, 141), is picked up on page 706: “The dearest nation of all is one that will survive no longer than you and I, a common movement at the mercy of death and time: the ad hoc adventure.” The nation of “we”, out of expediency playing Their game in order to free ourselves of

Them, must change the game once “we” have won. Politics, much of it not interlocked with greater aims, will have to be allowed expression, or it will become “much of a problem”.

In some ways, the remainder of this thesis is dedicated to coming to terms with these two quotes from *Gravity's Rainbow*. The manifesto that they combine into takes into account the formulations of incompleteness that infiltrate the novel (both scientific, like Godel's theorem, or colloquial, like Murphy's law). These stipulate that just when the end is in sight, and closure and perfection seems attainable, something will go wrong. The assumption behind this type of law – that total closure is actually impossible – is one that totalitarianism resists strongly. By accepting rather than resisting provisionality, the Counterforce has sketched a political position which resists extreme dichotomies and hence what I will come to call, in the context of these novels, (totalitarian) “fascism”. While the rocket has yet to strike, “we” still have the opportunity to prevent it from doing so, and this opportunity has everything to do with acceptance of difference within the system. If the Counterforce plays Their game and forms a universalising system, out of the expediency of forming revolutionary consciousness from the threat They pose, somehow this universalisation has to remain absolutely provisional, and yet at the same time prevent the sort of chaos, totally unstructured space, that might establish a general nostalgia for strong forms to form in reaction to it.

The question is, as Pirate well knows, what do “we” do to retain this provisionality, and not become a “They” (hence separating They and We from the both-They-and-We the Counterforce becomes if it is provisional) “after we have won” (638). The Counterforce, like the citizens of PR<sup>3</sup>, make a basic revolutionary mistake here, and so they fail; they are able to be assimilated into “the Firm's” system, become part of the totality. That is, they make “they” separate from “we” – they assume they can exist on the outside of the system – a tactic which plays into Their hands because, as Pynchon points out, the war is more over structure and commodities than national allegiances and territory. In other words, the Counterforce's tactics (as opposed to their ideals) yearn for a totality of their own, they eventually favour a structure that assumes “we” and “they” are separate, that they can get outside the “They” system. Such a move requires rules to keep the structure of that separation in place. It is therefore no longer an “ad-hoc adventure”.

But perhaps it once was. Perhaps they were once able to assimilate the fact that their project was expedient, and hence was *delusional*, into their own politics. The “we-system” only sells out to “the Firm” when it loses its sense of its own delusionality – when the Counterforce has “spokespeople” who talk to the *Wall Street Journal* (an icon of not only respectability but of markets), saying “We were never that concerned with Slothrop *qua* Slothrop” (738). This statement is from someone who proffers a delusional system *and has forgotten it is delusional*. This thread of ideas, identifiable in other contexts in Pynchon, will be picked up on in Chapter nine.

In Chapter nine also, I will connect this with the category of images Pynchon chooses to associate with Weed and other figures of hope not only in *Vineland* but also *Gravity’s Rainbow*. These images may be of “we”, but they are also of “they” – corporate properties, products of the film and television industries. Weed, Pynchon observes, wears Daffy Duck’s image on his jeans. He is thus associated with cartoons in the same way that Osbie Feel is, boasting a Porky Pig tattoo, in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Seaman “Pig” Bodine, the only member of the Counterforce capable of retaining a sense of the fading Slothrop by the end of the novel, is continually associated with Dumbo the Elephant. Weed is also “a character in a movie”, and “fucks like a porn star”; in addition, the most positive characters in Pynchon’s fiction are always associated with low culture. The later chapters of this thesis, after I unpack Pynchon and Ellis’s characterisation of contemporary society as having (totalitarian) “fascist” elements, will investigate this tendency by focusing on the anti-fascist potential of cartoons; that is, I will suggest that cartoons can stand in for delusional “we” counter systems *that do not forget they are delusional and hence do not give in to the sort of rationality that characterise fascist They systems*.

## Chapter three

### Totalitarian Control

#### Control structures in Pynchon's novels

Pynchon appears to question whether many of the attributes of postmodernism that appear in his novels will necessarily counteract the power of systemic thinking, even as he posits the suggestion that they might. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Tyrone Slothrop's hedonism and confusion, as well as his eventual dispersal, nullify any genuine threat he may have posed to "the System" even as he is apparently personally able to escape it. It has contained this threat, just as it was able to eventually contain the threat posed by a Counterforce unable to keep to its "ad-hoc" ideals. The Counterforce's assimilation, after initially positioning itself in the margins of official discourse, came about by its inability to sustain the provisionality called for in the conversation that ended the previous chapter. Eventually the Counterforce's energies became directed toward conserving the system, even as they remained officially opposed to it, because its structure and survival of the institution overtook the "ad-hoc adventure".

This can be seen if we contrast the early Counterforce with the late. One significant (if local) early triumph involves an ambush of one of Their social and business functions by Roger Mexico and Pig Bodine. These two subversives momentarily disrupt official discourses by confronting them with toilet language, the discourse of body waste. They put the well-to-do diners off their dinner by announcing an impromptu menu of "pus pudding", "snot soup", "smegma stew" and other such preterite delicacies (715). The function thereafter collapses among vomiting, sobs, threats, and chaos. As such, it exposes a vulnerability in the elect personality, and by extension Their system, a space the preterite might exploit, if it were to organise itself appropriately to do so.

The decline of the Counterforce, however, is signalled even before this episode:

Well, if the Counterforce knew better what those categories [of world

economics and “Albatross nosology”<sup>1</sup>] concealed, they might be in a better position to disarm, de-penis and dismantle the Man. But they don’t. Actually they do, but they don’t admit it. Sad but true. They are as schizoid, as double-minded in the massive presence of money, as any of the rest of us, and that’s the hard fact. The Man has a branch office in each of our brains, his corporate emblem is a white albatross, each local rep has a cover known as the Ego, and their mission in this world is Bad Shit. We do know what’s going on, and we let it go on[...] (712-713)

The desire for personal wealth and power, the seductiveness of the possibility of power (and along with it a sense of possible immunity from death) and the charisma assumed of those who possess it (“As long as we can see them, stare at them, those massively moneyed, once in a while. As long as they allow us a glimpse, however rarely. We need that. And how they know it – how often, under what conditions...” [713]) activate the ego and disarm the utopia of the kind of anarchism the Counterforce stood for, one that is steadfastly material and hence mortal. Unconsciously or not, we all desire election: the presence of the elect’s totalised ego in us seems to be at the root of this desire. Eventually we revert to the ego, and when we do, we’ve begun playing the game of “the Man”. This is exactly what the Counterforce is doing by the 1970s, when a “spokesman” is interviewed in *The Wall Street Journal*:

“We were never that concerned with Slothrop *qua* Slothrop”, a spokesman for the Counterforce admitted recently in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*.

Interviewer: You mean, then, that he was more a rallying point.

Spokesman: No, not even that. Opinion even at the start was divided. It was one of our fatal weaknesses. [I’m sure you want to hear about fatal weaknesses.] Some called him a “pretext”. Others felt he was a genuine, point-for-point microcosm [...] A Raketen-Stadt Charlie Noble, you might say... [Yes. A cute way of putting it. I am betraying them all... the worst of it is that I know what your editors want. I am a traitor. I carry it with me. Your virus. Spread by your tireless Typhoid Marys, cruising the markets and the stations[....]] (738-9 Pynchon’s square brackets, my ellipses in square brackets)

---

<sup>1</sup> “Nosology is the study and classification of diseases” (Weisenburger, 297). Albatrosses appear to be a constant symbol of the relationship between the self and governing control structures over the ego – they appear in *Gravity’s Rainbow* on pages 261, 354, 623, 661, 701 and 712-13. Could “Albatross Nosology” be the disease of the “self” (according to an officially categorised notion of both a disease and a proper self), e.g. a “diseased self” diseased precisely because it has to some degree escaped Their control?



This “virus” is a human need to lean on “structures favouring death”, as one of the characters puts it, inherent in the markets and networks of industrial development, the need for a “System”. Eventually this member of the Counterforce reverted to a pre-existent pattern, a pattern or structure that he understands, because it represents the re-emergence of the structured ego. This ego tries to cut down on “fatal weaknesses” and outlive its moment – the Counterforce sacrificed its anarchism to become an institution.

Similarly, *Vineland* is set in an America in which The System there has contained any effective resistance. In *Vineland*, television, characterised in the novel as “the Tube”, acts as a kind of parent-figure of an “extended national family” (*Vineland*, 269), and appears to get some of Pynchon’s blame for America’s inability to resist increasing political domination over their lives. It may seem out of character for Pynchon, who is often regarded as a writer who favours low culture over high in his writing, to attack a popular cultural medium wholesale, but here it is worth keeping in mind Pynchon’s ambivalence about cartoons that I outlined in Chapter one. While television appears to perform the postmodern tasks of producing fragmentation, favouring popular (preterite) over high (elect) culture, and thus undermining Their system with the vulgar, ad-hoc stories and the obscene, in actuality it does the opposite by keeping the people from taking the action they need to take to free themselves from political domination. It acts as “mass” culture imposed from above rather than a popular culture created and/or co-opted from below by the people. In *Vineland*, television is being used to mould a “timeless, defectively imagined future of zero-tolerance drug-free Americans all pulling their weight and all locked into the official economy, inoffensive music, endless family specials on the Tube, church all week long, and, on special days, for extra good behaviour, maybe a cookie” (221-2), a description that states directly the narrator’s belief that America is approaching a totalitarian state. That this strategy is already working is confirmed by the fact that, according to DEA agent Hector Zuñiga, “since about ‘81 kids were com’n in all on their own ask’n about careers, no need for no separate facility anymore...” (347). Rather than the clumsy manual “re-education” methods practised under Nixon, and exemplified in the novel by Brock Vond’s PREP camps, the Reagan presidency is characterised as the era of the official use of the image. The image is proving, for the characters of *Vineland*, to be a cleaner and more effective method of

achieving a society that conforms totally with what the elect want of it than mere terror ever could.

Pynchon directly links official television with political domination in a similar manner:

...when the cable television companies showed up in the county, got into skirmishes that included exchanges of gunfire between gangs of rival cable riggers, eager to claim souls for their distant principles, fighting it out house by house, with the Board of Supervisors compelled eventually to partition the county into Cable Zones, which in time became political units in their own right as the Tubal entrepreneurs went extending their webs even when there weren't enough residents per linear mile to pay the rigging cost.... (319)

The link here between TV zones and political units, of course, pertains to officially sanctioned television watching (the passive sort, like Hector's compulsion to "bathe in rays, lap and suck at the flow of image" [335]). This flow is one-way, and feeds into an increasing reliance on spectacles, and on characters behaving as if they were involved in spectacles. The content of the Tube functions ideologically. For instance, drugs are re-cast as evil (342) and police shows are "propaganda message[s] of cops-are-only-human-got-to-do-their-job, turning agents of government repression [in aid of 'the state law-enforcement apparatus which was calling itself America' (354)] into sympathetic heroes" (345). But the medium itself has begun to dominate the way people think and behave. Isaiah suggests an awareness of the political power of "the Tube", when he tells Zoyd, who wants a way to stop Brock Vond harassing him periodically about Frenesi,

"Whole problem 'th you folks's generation... nothing personal, is you believed in your Revolution, put your lives right out there for it – but you sure didn't understand much about the Tube. Minute the Tube got hold of you folks that was it, that whole alternative America, el deado meato, just like th' Indians, sold it all to your real enemies, and even in 1970 dollars – it was way too cheap...."

"Well I hope you're wrong", Zoyd breezed on, "'cause plan B was to try and get my case on '60 Minutes', or one of them." (373)

The "Tube" has caused a deadening of America's political consciousness. In *The*

*Society of the Spectacle*, French social critic Guy Debord (1967) posits the “spectacle” as a totalising manifestation of commodity capitalism. It creates the conditions whereby people live their lives as if they are cinema patrons or television watchers and their lives a film or show they are viewing. The spectacle can be said to dominate when all aspects of life become mediated or infected by images. Debord writes: “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles” (#1). These conditions occur when the commodity has infiltrated all aspects of existence (#42), because commodity fetishism, “the domination of society by ‘intangible as well as tangible things,’ which reaches its absolute fulfilment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible *par excellence*” (#36) is universalised, and allows for the change in consciousness needed for the image to dominate the real. Thus the spectacle is the fulfilment of commodity capitalism – “The world at once present and absent which the spectacle *makes visible is the world of the commodity dominating all that is lived.*” (#37, Debord’s italics) – and marks the arrival of post-industrial capitalism, where commodities needn’t be concrete objects. Certainly, Baudrillard (1984) and Jameson (1983; c1991), among others, have noted that “postindustrial” or “late” capitalism opens increasing areas of existence to the process of commodification. This has reached a point, for instance, where people are expected to project an “image” in order to “sell themselves” as employees, lovers, and friends, a fact apparent to anyone with a television set.

“Itself a product of rationality” (Debord, #27), the spectacle has therefore arrived in an age when representation is waxing prevalent. Debord refers, of course, to the mass media in all its manifestations. The commodified image is hermaphroditic and narcissistic, reproducing itself and presenting itself as pleasing and good to the beholder – “that which appears is good, that which is good appears” (#12), says Debord of the spectacle’s logic. The viewer is coerced into the desire for spectacular images, and spectacular things in general. Debord regards this as life abstracted: where “being”, and then “having” were once socially privileged, now “appearing” is (#17).

The commodity and the spectacle are narcissistically self-referential, ultimately rendering the spectator passive – the spectator becomes shut out of the spectacle’s closed

system. The spectacle is “the existing order’s uninterrupted discourse about itself, its laudatory monologue. It is the self-portrait of power in the epoch of its totalitarian management of the conditions of existence” (#24). Because reality has, under the gaze of the spectacle, become mediated, the media screen constitutes the only reality available for the viewer. The spectacle constitutes its subjects as consuming spectators because the commodified image is now all-pervasive.

Such totalisation alters people’s relation to time and history, as now life itself is viewed passively as if it were mere appearance. The spectacle hypnotises, urging its subjects to consume both images and products. The spectator becomes trapped as the non-privileged component of a spectacle/spectator, active/passive dichotomy, because the spectacle demands “passive acceptance which in fact it already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance” (#12). Hence, although it seems to break down borders and their mortar, hierarchies, it does so only to set up yet more rigid ones. Seeing this, Debord comments that “the success of the economic system of separation is the proletarianization of the world” (#24). In this totalitarian environment, all the citizens become equally subject(ed) to the will of the prevailing ideology.

In *Vineland*, many people are addicted to television in one way or another. Hector, for instance, who spent much of his federal career trying to turn Zoyd informer, is frequently committed to a “Tubal detox” centre. Moreover, there is an entire community called the Thanatoids, souls who deny that they are dead, and who ghost away their time in front of the television. The Thanatoids are seen as being asleep, in a narcotic state, not able to die properly. They are, for James Berger, “symptoms – physical marks on the social body – of the traumatic 60s now haunting and contributing to the traumas of the 80s” (1995). In this they are similar to Zoyd, lying passive, akin perhaps to the “Glozing neuter” figure Pynchon criticises in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. This is seen as sinister, as Hector’s “Tubal detox” centre’s “house hymn” testifies:

THE TUBE  
Oh... the... Tube!  
It’s poi-soning your brain!  
Oh, yes....

It's driv-ing you, insane!  
 It's shoot-ing rays, at you,  
 Over ev'ry-thing ya do,  
 It sees you in your bedroom,  
 And-on th' toi-let too!  
 Yoo Hoo! The  
 Tube....  
 It knows, your ev'ry thought,  
 Hey, Boob, you thought you would-  
 T'n get caught-  
 While you were sittin' there, starin' at "The  
 Brady Bunch,"  
 Big fat computer jus'  
 Had you for lunch, now Th'  
 Tube -  
 It's plugged right in, to you! (336-7)

Pynchon suggests that our lives are similar to those of the novel's Thanatoids in that we have been deadened by the flows of trivia that the television offers us. Like them, people are "not living but persisting" (173), and "in wandering mazes, lost" (Safer 1994, 52). We have been distracted into a sleepy numbness by the mediated world, and this accounts for the ultimate failure of the radical left of the 1960s, and the failure of the 1980s to mount any sort of equivalent revolt. For Berger, television has helped discredit the 1960s, because for the Reagan-era 1980s the promise of the 1960s is dangerous:

the Thanatoids are also ridiculous, another absurd remnant (like Zoyd at the novel's opening) of the psychedelic 60s. And in this tension, between a serious, portentous return of historical trauma and its representation as a comic schtick enacted under the aegis of mass media, we see a crucial feature of Pynchon's literary technique in *Vineland*, his representation of history, and his version of nostalgia. A ghost of the 60s can return in the 80s only as its own simulation: a ghost playing a ghost, a "Thanatoid," a ghost expressed in technical jargon, a mediated, postmodern ghost of the Reagan era with an alarm watch that beeps out "Wachet Auf." Yet, the 60s continued to return, albeit in these ridiculous, ideologically tinted, "fetishized" forms, because of their traumatic, indeed apocalyptic, place in American history. (1995, internet page)

The continued and unavoidable "return" of the 1960s in the body of the 1980s, as a ghost, causes the "system" in power to find a way of defusing them. Television enables them to hide the 1960s in plain sight, re-cast it as entertainment so that the people stand

to one side of it, remain passive.

In addition to this, Pynchon regards television as a kind of drug. While TV is thus linked in some ways positively with the counterculture, drugs are also seen as being controlled by big government forces – FBI agent Roy Ibbles has an epiphany, late in the novel, during which he identifies George Bush as a drugs overlord<sup>2</sup>. Ibbles is suspicious of “how cheap coke has been since ‘81... I say that whosoever the CIA putteth in its meathooks upon the world, there also are to be found substances which God may have created but the U.S. code hath decided to control. Get me? Now old Bush used to be head of CIA, so you figure it out” (353-4). The characters here have been rendered utterly passive by television. The confusion and loss it causes them puts them in a state of anaesthesia – it is as if they are on drugs, as the comparison with secret government cocaine peddling makes clear.

### Totality, totalitarianism

I will be arguing that post-industrial capitalism, as it is described by Pynchon in *Vineland*, and indeed *Gravity's Rainbow*, as well as Ellis in *American Psycho*, forms a new development of mass totalitarian society. In this form of totalitarianism, it is not the Party that extends its power throughout all of society, but a specific economic system of relations, based around the commodity and the spectacle. Structurally, however, its similarity to older forms of totalitarian society is striking: it is not merely the political institutions of society that have been captured by the dominant ideology, as would be the case in an authoritarian government, but the entirety of society.

Carl J. Friedrich characterised totalitarianism with six general points (Friedrich, et al 1969, 126). The first of these is that a totalitarianism has an official ideology imposed without exception upon the population. This ideology appealed to an over-arching law which would lead to a “perfect final state of mankind” (Schapiro 1972, 18). Also, there was a single party with a single leader, which, as Leonard Schapiro put it, was “organised hierarchically and either superior to or intertwined with the state bureaucracy” (ibid).

---

<sup>2</sup> President George H.W. Bush, just to clarify, who was Reagan's Vice President in 1984 when the bulk of *Vineland* is set.

The ideology was imposed by “a technically conditioned near-complete monopoly of control, by the party and the bureaucracy subordinate to it, of the effective use of all weapons of armed combat; a near-complete monopoly similarly exercised over all means of effective mass-communication; and a system of physical or psychological terroristic police control” (18).

Claude Lefort notes that totalitarianism was not a form of the state but more properly “a form of society”, in which “the political ceases to exist as a separate sphere” (1986, 79). The totalitarian party was a political organisation that monopolised not just the usual organs of political control such as the police, the army, the secret service and the state bureaucracies, but in addition, all political, economic and social organisations from the church, schools, local bodies, outdoor education groups. The result is that the political, monopolised by the one official party, becomes identified with society as a whole: “[t]he party embodies in bureaucratic society an historical function of an absolutely *new* type. It is the agent of a complete penetration of civil society by the state. More precisely, it is the milieu in which the state changes itself into society or society into the state” (80).

Lefort suggests that it is this identification of the party with society, coupled with the technological means to enforce it, which sets totalitarianism apart from previous despotisms. Identification of the political sphere with the social leaves no room for any alternative: the ideology of the ruling elite here enacts closure by permeating throughout every sphere of existence. According to Hannah Arendt, whose *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1953; 1967) is a classic if not universally accepted study, Hitler’s and Stalin’s regimes were able to achieve their control by means of tactically deploying chaos, paradoxically guaranteeing absolute obedience to the official ideology. They do this by “set[ting] everything around them in motion” (306); both set up a confusion of rival bureaucracies in their respective civil services, with very little guidance as to lines of command or demarcation (see 400-4; also noted in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 421). The resulting competition to best carry out the wishes of the leader produced absolute focus on the task at hand and on the wishes of the leader, a focus reinforced by the ever-present threat of the “liquidation” of failed bureaucracies (Arendt, 404). In this way, the “destiny” of the movement, linked ideologically to an overarching law, dogma or truth,

seemed to fulfil itself as if by magic (349-50).

What justification is there, then, for considering late capitalism to be a form of totalitarianism? At first, it seems something of an absurdity: late capitalism operates under the conditions of political choice: there is no single party that has monopolised the ideology of society. Nor do the police and other state power apparatuses exercise excessive control by force of arms – although they frequently do exceed their powers, even Vond's squadron does not operate at the extremes of the SS or Stalin's secret police. Indeed, one of the central themes of *Vineland* is that such tactics are now obsolete, and are no longer so much supported by those in power, so that Reagan's budget cuts ironically save Prairie from Brock at the end. Nor is it necessary for the state to monopolise mass communication, or plan the economic direction of the state centrally.

However, *Vineland* suggests that the U.S. has been governed by a totalitarian movement in power since at least the 1960s, although it is one that has changed character over that time. The episodes set in the 1960s (and before) depict repressive use of state violence, and it is suggested that this continues into the present of the novel. By Reagan, the need to have a leader, a single "man", backed up by secret police, has become obsolete for totalitarian-like conditions to nonetheless prevail. Reagan continues to rule, but he now has a far more effective means than Brock's PREP camps at his disposal to suppress disruptive elements: the spectacle (which nonetheless existed during the 1960s but has become even more dominant since), which Debord describes as totalitarian. The possibility of totalitarianism in Western democracies is suggested by Lefort:

[totalitarianism] is beginning to be felt in the United States, even though democratic institutions have not ceased to operate there. This is because, at the deepest level, it is linked to the structure of modern production and to the requirements of social integration which correspond to it. The expansion of industry, the progressive invasion of every domain by its methods while increasingly isolating producers in their own particular spheres, brings about, as Marx indicated, a *socialisation* of society, placing each individual in a state of dependence on all others and rendering necessary the explicit recognition of the ideal unity of society. (Lefort, 79-80)

In Reagan's *Vineland*, Althusser's conception of ideological interpellation has extended itself into every area of life (1971). For Althusser, ideology "calls", as it were,



someone to it (48). Here, the term has two separate senses: there is the specific term used to refer to this or that ideology (he's a fascist, she's a free-market capitalist, he's an imperialist), and there is a more general use, one which is applied to ideology generally, or to "overarching ideology" (7). In the bourgeois state, there is no escape from ideology (44), which is a "representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (36). This is because bourgeois societies deploy a variety of "ideological state apparatuses" (16-17), which complement "(repressive) State Apparatuses" (16). Ideological state apparatuses include the education systems, religious systems, the family unit and others, all geared as an unconscious function to interpellate people as subjects of ideology, and so to subject them to ideology and make them ideological subjects (49). Ideology, in this sense, functions somewhat like a mirror: people see an image of themselves in the ideology reflected back to them (54). This process functions in a similar way to that of Jacques Lacan's "Mirror Stage" of psychological development (see below, 74). The ideology provides a whole and socially cohesive identity, and so their subjectivity becomes rooted in a misrecognition of themselves as naturally belonging to this ideology (56-7). In this way, the pleasing nature of the ideology can reinforce the ego. It is through ideology generally and ideologies in particular that certain things are read in certain ways, and that common sense becomes common – "it is a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are obviousnesses) obviousnesses as obviousnesses" (46).

Lefort notes a similar thing about late capitalist society, although he resists labelling it totalitarian. Instead, he prefers to conceptualise it as *sui generis*, a supercession of a form of totalitarianism that has become obsolete. But if we look at the way he theorises Stalinism, and apply it to the cultural situation that emerges in the texts we will read here, the comparisons are quite striking. To Lefort, Stalinism is a stage of the totalitarian party. It "appeared when the party succeeded in concentrating all power in its hands, identified itself with the state, and, as the state, subordinated all other institutions in society to itself and freed itself of all social control, while at the same time seeking to eliminate all opposition within its ranks," as John Thompson puts it in his introduction (Lefort 1986, 5). In the case of late "spectacle" capitalism, instead of concentrating all power in the hands of a party, which is obsolete in ideological terms,

everything in society makes assumptions that are based on the spectacle's logic. This is more or less Althusser's definition of ideology; it is that which makes obviousnesses obvious. The spectacle identifies, not with the state, which again is growing obsolete, but with society and also with democracy – with something greater than the state. All institutions are subordinated to it because everything is based upon looking, and upon commodification. The spectacle, as Pynchon and Ellis will depict it, has freed itself of all social control, and while (*American Psycho* notwithstanding) it uses violence less commonly to eliminate the forces opposed to it than Stalinism did, as Pynchon notes, it negates opponents both by the dominance of the spectacle ideological apparatus (in *Vineland* characters cannot think outside the parameters of “the Tube”) and by its power to delegitimise and select.

Implicit in this is a deliberate breaking down of differences, a feature of postmodernity, so that totalitarianism can claim that “the separation between different domains of social life is negated” (Lefort, 6). Society has metamorphosed, then, so that “the political ceases to exist as a separate sphere” (6). This homogenisation is a deliberate strategy of the ideology. Lefort calls the “new society” of the Western Democracies the “invisible ideology” (see 224-36). As with totalitarianism, this ideology's purpose is the homogenisation of society, only with totalisation implicit, whereas before it was explicit, seen as a good (225). Mass-media and advertising, and the discourse of consumption, create a closed universe, which in effect is a modern mutation of the totalitarian form. Postmodern and post-structuralist ideas about resistance to closure and endless freeplay of the signifier add to a sense of things being set in motion in a similar way to the methods of the totalitarian movements (Baudrillard's depictions of postmodern environments in “The Precession of Simulacra” [1984] and “The Ecstasy of Communication” [1983] provide an excellent sense of this). This suggests that late capitalism's totalitarian tendencies, in which the commodity colonises every conceivable aspect of existence, are well-suited to some postmodern concepts and phenomena.

*Gravity's Rainbow* is similarly about totalitarian conditions. Early on, it is explained about Slothrop that “They [have] busted the sod prairies of his brain, tilled and sown there, and subsidised him not to grow anything of his own...” (210, my ellipsis). The System is so effective at this sort of control that, as we have seen, even strategies of

resistance can be pulled into the service of the system. Ultimately, this total control leads to ideas of transcendence, because the belief is there that everything can be captured by the system, and so the system itself must have a definable shape, one that can be seen if you find a certain purity, a “high” enough position above it.

However, history shows that this sort of transcendence has a downside: it establishes itself by violence, because it can never be fully realised in the world. Once totalitarianism developed, such action could be taken against any group that had been consigned to statelessness (Arendt, 290); in other words, those that did not “belong”. Stateless people exist outside the system of legal identity, and are therefore problematic for the nation state itself. Thus, the totalitarian regimes she investigates (Nazism and Stalinism) were able to perpetrate a “calamity of the rightless” (295), whereby no legal protection was given to whole communities of disenfranchised people, who had no country to go to when they were deported. The Jews are the example *par excellence* of this tactic: Hitler did not immediately declare their extermination, rather, despite his absolute powers to commit arbitrary acts, he carefully cleared the ground first by depriving them of citizenship. Such treatment is typical of totalitarian regimes. Founded on self- or propaganda-produced mythologies, totalitarian regimes have no enemies, only victims. Only innocent people, people who the state holds in no regard whatsoever, could lose rights so completely. They are first constructed as “other”, and then removed absolutely from the totality. Since nothing can exist outside the totality, they are turned into nothing.

It is actually better to be a criminal in a totalitarian regime than to be innocent, because then, with the legal identity criminality provides you with, you are at least entitled to legal rights (295). The state recognises you, and so must identify with you to an extent. The totalitarian citizen is kept mobilised by the constant social change the leader keeps imposing on the people. It is as if the construction of an other, coupled with its extermination, or “liquidation”, acts as the engine of the totalitarian party’s power: the arbitrariness of the project provides terror that creates the means for absolute social control and obedience, an obedience that nevertheless does not increase the citizen’s chance of being saved.

The violence of a binary structure can help explain why totalitarianisms create

victims in such a way. It should be noted that it is only in the totalisation of a binary structure that such extreme effects are felt. As with the presence of meaning in a text, the full presence of a political ideology never “arrives”, in Derridian terms, because it is always shadowed by “difference”. The trace of the other ideologies haunts the structure, and so the system contains within it the aporia that would undo it. This could explain Stalin’s famed paranoia, for instance: the system could not bear the pressure of its own maintenance – there always was an other, which to a system diffused totally throughout society meant something not *of* it. Since the system had no outside, as it was total, this other made no sense to it; it couldn’t recognise it as being part of itself, and so sought to eliminate it, to “suture over” the difference within. Because this act never resolves the aporia, this process could logically continue until the system had devoured all of society.

As Molly Hite notes, the transcendence that allows one to “see the whole shape at once” is, in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “inseparable from death” (c1983, 103). Hence attempts at transcendental, or total, control rely on “structures favouring death” (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 167). Death shadows our century, as the 00000 rocket shadows the Orpheus theatre at the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. It does so when totalisation, be it fascist ideology practised by Blicero/Weissmann, the paranoia of a structure where “everything is connected” (703), or the corporate totalisation of Walter Rathenau (“structures favouring death” is his ghost’s term) becomes a dominant impulse in cultural relations and activities:

“But this is all the impersonation of life. The real movement is not from death to any rebirth. It is from death to death transfigured[...]. You think you’d rather hear about what you call ‘life’: the growing, organic Kartell. But it’s only another illusion. A very clever robot. The more dynamic it seems to you, the more deep and dead, in reality, it grows. Look at the smokestacks, how they proliferate, fanning the wastes of original waste over greater and greater masses of city. Structurally, they are strongest in compression. A smokestack can survive any explosion – even the shock wave from one of the new cosmic bombs” – a bit of a murmur around the table at this – “as you all must know. The persistence, then, of structures favouring death. Death converted into more death. Perfecting its reign.” (166-7)

Totalisation and the aestheticisation of politics

Rathenau has come to understand that as control becomes more widespread, to the point of being nearly absolute – as Their cartel spreads its net – death itself becomes dominant. Thus only when you are actually dead can you “see the whole shape at once” (165): absolute totalisation of vision can only take place from the perspective of death itself.

Hite outlines the ways that *Gravity's Rainbow* faces this problem. The paranoia that Slothrop experiences throughout, forced by his relationship to Them, is just one example of totalisation (he too feels that “everything is connected”). Slothrop toys at one point with “anti-paranoia”, the possibility that “nothing is connected to anything” (434), but Pynchon admits that “not many of us can bear [this] for very long” (434). This is, of course, a form of totalisation too, because everything is thus connected (and accounted for) in its essential unconnectedness. Slothrop quickly reverts, though. The novel’s encyclopaedic reach, making just these Slothropian connections between such diverse areas of discourse as Tarot readings, the invention of mauve-coloured dyes, and the extinction of the dodo, for instance, add to the notion that such totalising connections can in fact be made. But often it seems that the point of all the learning that Pynchon shows off in these 760 pages is to demonstrate its own ultimate failure: as Hite says,

[the] marked diffusion of the narrative energy so near the conclusion suggests that the text is thematically committed to incompleteness. The fact that ostensibly central concerns fail to achieve any sort of resolution reinforces this suggestion. Fundamental enigmas – the nature of Slothrop’s relation to the mystery stimulus, the direction and target of Blicero’s last firing, the purpose of the Hereros’ rocket – are either left ambiguous or dropped entirely. (Hite, 97)

The novel remains on the side of incompleteness, tempted but unable, or unwilling, to take a final step towards totalisation. While you cannot say that nothing in here is connected to anything else, neither can you say Pynchon connects together all the plot strands.

The parabola is also a metaphor *for* control and structure. It represents the kind of

conceptual system that human beings use to circumscribe and rationalise their experiences in order to take charge of it. The irony that Pynchon explores in *Gravity's Rainbow* is that such a system always betrays its creators by claiming autonomy for itself. The more comprehensive the structure, the more likely it is to look like fate, so that humanity finds itself serving an antihuman Higher Purpose when it is seduced by the clarity and coherence of its own explanations. The implicit model for all such totalising systems is the myth of the providential plan, which purports to account for all aspects of human life by directing history to a predetermined end. With the development of science and technology, this myth has become increasingly ironised: historical processes remain inevitable, but the goal of the system is its own destruction. By unifying experience within a controlling vision, humanity has arrived at a model of universal coherence that makes freedom impossible and annihilation imminent. (98)

This refers to a structure favouring death, but it also suggests something else, Walter Benjamin's insights into the mechanisms of fascism. Seduced into admiring "the clarity and coherence of [our] own explanations", we members of humanity enjoy, aesthetically and perhaps even sexually (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 738), the shape of our own collective death: by being such an aesthetically pleasing structure, the aesthetics of the parabola – gravity's rainbow itself – mask or transfigure the death they promise. By learning to enjoy the coherence of a total system, we learn to enjoy the process that will result in our own death. After all, what is on the movie screen at the end of the novel? The parabolic path of a "bright angel of death" (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 760), prevented from falling the entire way only by Byron the Bulb's brave but useless sacrifice ("a projector bulb has burned out" (ibid), giving the audience a disturbingly white screen, or page). We have "not learned to see" (ibid) the real film. The audience therefore treats its collective death as spectacle – "come-on! Start – the – show!", we rhythmically clap (ibid).

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1970), Benjamin traces the history of what he calls the aura of artworks, and links the breakdown of that aura created by technologies of artistic reproduction with the fascism that had recently gained power in his home country of Germany. For Benjamin, in the era of mechanical reproducibility, a work of art's very aesthetic ontology – its mode of being as an aesthetic object – changes (221). A work of bourgeois high art has an "aura", which provides the sense of high art's invincibility. People and institutions in power can hide behind this

aura, turning artworks into cult items that are only available to the initiated. By the twentieth century, this power has dissipated somewhat, because mechanical reproduction has democratised access to art (220). For the first time, reproduction techniques have created mass art, so that the power of the authentic object no longer holds its sway so much. Auratic art still retained traces of its original ritualistic function – ritual is the “location of its original use value” (224), but now, with reproducibility, “the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics” (224). Film and photography are modern artforms which are privileged in this regard. Because the aura is irrelevant to these artforms – in these “exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to the ritual value” (226), and so in the debates over whether photography was to be classified as an art, there was a clear fissure, a clear epistemological break to be observed, as “the primary question – whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art – was not raised” (227).

Benjamin claims that there had indeed been such a transformation. In order to accommodate this, new cults were developed by capitalist institutions such as the movie studios. These were cults of personality manifest in the “star system”, and their function was partly to offset the potential of mechanically reproducible art to produce revolutionary consciousness in a Marxian sense. So there was a breakthrough in the potential of art for revolution, and in response capital moved to limit this new potential of mass art. The mechanical reproduction of art also created changes in human perception, changes which were produced by the loss of aura in art, and it has also given the spectator, the proletarian spectator in the case of film, access to a closeness never found in art before (233). Closeness comes when the aura shrivels away; the aura which used to create distance between the artwork and the viewer (223). In film, closeness also allows for extensions of human potential, in sight, where slow-motion shots might reveal new structural formations behind straightforward (and therefore mystified) actions. The Dada movement shocked people out of their intellectual complacency; film shocks physically as well (238). It is the newly found closeness to the work, caused by the disappearance of the aura, which is responsible for this shock. As the artwork is relieved of its cultic

origins, so is the recipient (240). This creates masses where, once, auratic mystification created classes. Lonely, passive contemplation is replaced by a collective audience of distracted viewers, viewers who are also, in the era of mechanical reproduction, forced to get close enough to a work of art to adopt a critical stance in relation to it (228).

But what emancipatory potential modernisation of the arts holds, fascism organises for its own benefit. Industrial capitalism's ability to increasingly proletarianize the masses is organised by fascism without altering the property structure of society (241). Such a change should have followed the awakening that technological growth provides the masses in their relationship to the arts, if fascism was to become a genuine socialist mass movement. But instead it became, in Germany, a totalitarian one. The withdrawal of the aura is compensated for by the mass cult of the Fuhrer, a totally attractive, non-auratic leader. As a defence against the newly-opened possibilities for revolution, rather than being given the opportunity to overthrow existing property relations, the newly-conscious mass is "given a chance to express themselves" (ibid). This renders politics aesthetic: "the violation of the masses, whom fascism, with its Fuhrer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an [aesthetic] apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values.... All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war. War and only war can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting the traditional property system.... Only war makes it possible to mobilise all of today's technical resources while maintaining the property system" (ibid). As one can see in the writings of the Italian Futurists, particularly Marinetti, the aesthetic justification for war was in place at the beginning of the century. "Unemployment and a lack of markets" (242) is responsible for the terrifying nature of modern imperialistic warfare, because technology can thus not be mobilised totally within the existing system of property relations. "Fascism ... expects war to supply the aesthetic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology" (ibid). Humans have become self-alienated to the degree that we can enjoy our "own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (ibid). We are alienated from ourselves and from our senses. This is at the heart of the aestheticisation of politics; fascism does not create these conditions, but manages them so that their effect is this alienation. The way to counteract this movement to aestheticise politics is to politicise



art (ibid), Benjamin says.

Politics throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* are seen as being aestheticised. One example of this is the mythologising of the Rocket. The Rocket represents "any system which cannot tolerate heresy" (747) – heresy being, as Hite points out, "unorthodox interpretation" (Hite, 140). Thus it represents that very total system that created it, the bringer of death. Slothrop has a sexual connection with it, and hence "with his, and his race's death" (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 738). Others have a spiritual connection, as "a new dispensation" of the Earth is "brought into being by the great firing" (753). Inevitably this is expressed aesthetically, such as in the episode when Katje Bourgesius witnesses a Schwarzkommando dance, her own part in the rocket's "life" mythologised as the centre of it (657-8), or when members of the preterite perform a spontaneous rose-dance to represent the mushroom cloud hanging that very moment over Hiroshima (594).

In addition, Slothrop, and his opposite Blicero, share an obsession with the rocket, that hypermasculine totem that Slothrop and Enzian both seek, and that Blicero used as a sacrificial vessel. It materialises Blicero's fears, which operate on the level of race. The rocket represents the fullest extent of the totality that comes from fear of the liminal – the inbetween and indistinct "Zonal" middle. It is pure structure, associated with malevolent technology and the parabola, which represents logical certainty. It is also the erection, the blood-gorged steel hypermasculine figure of fascism, standing at attention. And like all such systems, as Hite says, its goal is its own destruction – it favours death. This rocket contains its human "other" within it; in a "womb" made of the new plastic Impolex G lies Gottfried, a feminised masochist and Blicero's underling. In this way, the explosion of the rocket will destroy what he represents. And, as Hite points out, in regard to his sacrifice of Gottfried in the rocket 00000,

characters committed to totalising structures would rather erase [an "unsettling blackness"]. Blicero's murder of Gottfried is such an erasure, for Gottfried is sacrificed on the altar of the rocket, the principle of totalization and thus of hierarchy and subordination. The rocket dictates that the sweep of history arches over trivial human lives. As he careens towards death, Gottfried witnesses the whiting-out of his own personal experience as he is assimilated to the providential trajectory.

...what is this death but a whitening, a carrying of whiteness to ultrawhite, what is

it but bleaches, detergents, oxidisers, abrasives – Streckefuss he's been today to the boy's tormented muscles, but more appropriately he is Blicher, Bleicheröde, Bleacher, Blicero, extending, rarefying the Caucasian pallor to an abolition of pigment, of melanin[...] (Hite, 153, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 759)

### *Aestheticised politics in Vineland*

Film and television in *Vineland* produce effects in both its politicised and non-politicised characters. Frenesi's treachery against her comrades is in fact linked directly by Pynchon to her complicity with the Spectacle, even when she believed she was acting in the interest of Revolution. While she was with the radical film collective "24fps" she documented government atrocities, feeling safe in the belief that her films would tell the truth and hence participate in the Revolution itself. After having met Brock Vond on one of these film missions, she was slowly turned around, eventually working as a government bureaucrat, very much still at Brock's disposal. That Frenesi is vulnerable to this all along is suggested by a note Pynchon included in a copy of *Vineland* he sent to an old college teacher. "This is what you get for asking, a third of a century ago in class, 'How about a story where the parents are progressive and the kids are fascists'", he wrote. "See, you never know when somebody might be listening" (see Hite 1994, 141). Frenesi's revolutionary film crew, named after the speed of the film, may be radical, but Brock is quick to notice that their use of their camera as a weapon might make their members susceptible to official power as they are already "turned on" to the exercise of power. The camera Frenesi is holding when she first sees Brock, according to Stacy Olster's analysis, contributes to her objectifying herself, while the camera techniques she favours, of course, are precisely those that objectify women in the 1930s and 1940s movies that compose what feminist critics call "dominant cinema" (Olster, 124). It is then logical that Prairie, watching Frenesi's old movies, has difficulty making an emotional connection with her mother because the films, already "mediated by projector and screen, afford no room for female spectatorship" (125). The camera people were also quite self-conscious about equating their cameras with guns, an analogy which provides them with some revolutionary rhetoric and quite a bit of their subversive *raison d'être*. These techniques also, Olster points out, define the Tube in the 1980s (ibid), the medium

that killed the revolution “el deado meato”. Television functions for Pynchon here as propaganda, and as an ideological brain-washing organ of the spectacle. A perception of things as spectacle is generally seen by Pynchon here as being fascist: when Frenesi is first turned by Brock, she exhibits her fascism by occupying a “world-next-to-the-world that not many would know how to get to, where she could kick back and watch the unfolding drama. No problem anymore with talk of ‘taking out’ Weed Atman, as he’d gone turning into a character in a movie...” (237). As she perceives the world as total spectacle, she becomes immune to feelings of guilt. The distanced filmmaking of the 24fps also becomes fascist precisely because the distance and contemplation it practices aestheticises the political, with the film-maker-shooters remaining safely out-of-the-action (as Prairie notices when she can’t find her mother in the films). They are detached, essentialising (the reality of the subject will be exposed by the act of filming it), “objective”, and at-a-distance. Repressive impositions of purity are, as often, answered by doctrines of purity. Frenesi’s vulnerability to fascist-type representation (she’s sexually excited by men in uniforms, by superheroes, by Vond’s power) is hence shown to be born of “progressive” aims.

In addition, the “Tube’s” totalitarian hold over the general public, rendering them passive far more effectively than force could, invites them into the sort of “extended national family” (269) the invocation of which is likely to bring Hitler into the reader’s mind. Susan Buck-Morss (1992), reading Benjamin, posits an account of how various anaesthetising techniques have increasingly been put to political use. For her, spectacle may function as an anaesthetic, a drug that creates a distance from life as a protection from shock. This is achieved by creating the conditions in which narcissistic reactions against shock, which reinforce pleasing images of wholeness, are routinely produced under fascist rule, so that its subjects identify with pleasing political structures as a protection against the dangers implied by shocks.

Buck-Morss’s essay begins by showing that the human sensorium (our entire sense apparatus) begins and ends in the world, in its perceptive apparatus. It is not identical to itself, but rather it needs its other, the world, to function (12). Gradually, as a strongly desensitised version of masculinity became privileged in Western culture – she cites Kant and Nietzsche – ways were found for our “synaesthetic system” (13) to close

off from perception and sensation, and hence the world. The nineteenth century brought an era of “manipulative experimentation with the elements of the synaesthetic system” (21). It was an age when people from all social strata became addicted to recreational drugs such as cocaine. This is in addition to tea, caffeine, nicotine and alcohol, narcotics which were culturally accepted years before.

Walter Benjamin’s analysis of modernity posits the battlefield – a limit-field of human shock; Freud studied its effects on the human psyche (16) – as instead merely analogous to conditions of living in industrial modernity. In short, the general condition of modernity is shell-shock, created by our exposing our perceptive apparatus to potential danger. Dangers of this sort might range from the perils of operating industrial machinery, to crossing the road (an example Benjamin cites [250n19]), to the temporal and physical dislocations and fragmentation watching film or television produces in us. In the mid-nineteenth century a new disorder, characterised by “‘Shattered’ nerves, nervous ‘breakdown’, ‘going to pieces’, ‘fragmentation’ of the psyche” (Buck-Morss, 19), called “neurasthenia”, was identified, “caused by ‘excess of stimulation.... modern civilisation’s ever-growing tax upon the brain and its tributaries...’” (19). The fragmentation caused by the spectacle, insisting on exposing people to violence and accidents for entertainment, seems to fit neatly into this economy of shock. Spectacular effects are described by Buck-Morss (after Marx and others) as “phantasmagoria”, “a narcotic... made out of reality itself” (22). If I try negotiating all the potential dangers inherent in modernity without the aid of narcotics, then my sensorium will sustain lasting damage, as the trauma begins to impact on my memory (19-21). Or worse – “for a drug-free, unbuffered adaptation to shock can prove fatal” (21). Hence drugs are used to numb the sensorium by closing off the drug-taker’s synaesthetic system from the world, because this world continually promises their system its downfall. Phantasmagoria also act as a narcotic,

...not through numbing, but through flooding the senses. These simulated sensoria alter consciousness, much like a drug, but they do so through sensory distraction rather than chemical alteration, and – most significantly – their effects are experienced collectively rather than individually. [Because “the goal is manipulation of the synaesthetic system by control of environmental stimuli” (22)], [e]veryone sees the same altered world, experiences the same total

environment. (22-23)

Few people would deny that drugs such as cocaine and heroin are a potential threat to the wellbeing of the organism that takes them. The possibility that living in a modern world necessitates their use to prevent death represents a very claustrophobic double-bind. “Drug addiction is characteristic of modernity. It is the correlate and counterpart of shock”, Buck-Morss says (21). Spectacular phantasmagoric narcotics produce similar dark alleyways. Phantasmagoria (the example Buck-Morss gives is Adorno’s reading of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* [25]) “hide[s] the alienation and fragmentation, the loneliness and the sensual impoverishment of modern existence that was the material out of which it is composed” (26). The spectacle is identical to this: it masks alienation with distraction, absorbing the subject into a total environment. This environment both produces shocks and provides the material for the sensorium’s survival, its closure against shocks. The spectacle offers continuous shock. Its phantasmagoric effects numb or flood the subject’s sensory apparatus, which becomes anaesthetised. Buck-Morss herself suggests the applicability of postmodernity to Benjamin’s analysis, especially “the twenty-odd years I’ve been reading [the artwork essay] – a period when politics as spectacle (including the aestheticised spectacle of war) has become commonplace in our televisual world” (3).

The net result of this is fascism. To make this point, Buck-Morss draws upon an argument Hal Foster makes while discussing surrealist sculpture. In “Armor Fou”, Foster’s aim was “to relate several works of Max Ernst and Hans Bellmer to a psychic apprehension of the body as armor”, “an apprehension I want[ed] to consider tentatively in terms of fascism” (Foster 1991, 65). One of the things he found was that Lacan’s reformulation of the mirror stage related “to a fantasy of ‘the body in pieces’ (*le corps morcelé*)” was “a *retroactive* effect of this imaginary unity of the mirror stage”. Accordingly, if there is a breakdown of imaginary unity, a crisis in narcissistic identification, the subject feels threatened by this bodily ‘chaos’. For Lacan this threat renders the ego not only paranoid but also aggressive, and this in turn compounds the aggressivity already immanent to its fragile foundation in the field of the other” (82, Foster’s emphasis). Buck-Morss goes further and suggests that Lacan’s Mirror Stage

makes a suggestive theory of fascism. She is struck, she says, by the temporal proximity of Benjamin's now-classic essay to Lacan's original formulation of the mirror stage. Lacan, in 1936, had been to see Hitler's Olympics, and Buck-Morss thinks that both men might have picked up on psychological realities prevalent at the time because the rise of various fascist movements might have brought hardening against modern danger to a point of crisis (Buck-Morss, 37).

In the mirror stage, to summarize, a child aged between six and eighteen months identifies with the image of itself in the mirror. This image is reflected back to the child as more perfect than it is in reality: a child that age has not yet gained the motor control that this image-ideal seems to be exhibiting. Nevertheless, this experience, and others after it, is a crucial stage in formulating the "I", subjectivity. The child sees itself as whole and separate, pleasingly so, even though its identification is a mis(re)cognition of this wholeness (see Lacan, 1977, 3-7). As Susan Buck-Morss says, "the subject identifies with the image as the 'form' (*Gestalt*) of the ego, in a way that conceals its own lack" (37). The establishment of the "I" is therefore a process situated specifically in the imaginary. Once this imaginary wholeness is established, the subject will experience a retroactive fantasy of *corps morcelé* ("body in pieces"), as a result of the repression of the body's non-perfection implied in the child's identifying with the image.

Foster "situated this theory in the historical context of early fascism, and pointed out the personal connections between Lacan and the Surrealist artists who made the fragmented body their theme" (37). The point is the theory's retroactivity. "The recollection of this infant fantasy", the body in pieces, "is triggered in the memory of the adult by something in his or her present situation. Thus the significance of Lacan's theory emerges only in the historical context of modernity as precisely the experience of the fragile body and the dangers to it of fragmentation that replicates the trauma of the original infantile event.... Lacan himself recognized the historical specificity of narcissistic disorders, commenting that Freud's major paper on narcissism, not accidentally, 'dates from the beginning of the 1914 war...'" (37). The fragmentation implied in the physical dangers of technology's mobilization has the potential to trigger such a narcissistic crisis, as does the obvious danger of fragmentation posed by war itself. Hence, as Foster suggests, Fascism thrived on a cult of a physical body armoured against

fragmentation and against pain (see Foster, 80-90). As Chapter five will show, under the spectacle too, the advance guard of the ideology armour themselves against the fragmentation suggested in the environment, while the rest of the population, such as those in *Vineland* who are ruled by the “Tube”, are numbed into submission, and are able to enjoy the process of their numbing.

## Chapter four

### A Total Fascist: Liminal Processes Favouring Totality

#### Engineering conformity in Vineland

*Vineland*, then, goes further than depicting an America pacified by the spectacle as totalitarian. It also characterises the U.S. Government, both before the spectacle became an effective tool of rendering the population inert, and after, as fascist, an accusation with its own set of connotations attached to it. Although *Vineland* continues the most political themes of *Gravity's Rainbow*, it pushes politics unmistakably into the centre, possibly because by 1990 Pynchon realised he was writing for an audience distanced from the highly politicised context of late 1960s radicalism. The themes that the later novel address include the idea that America is the result of a “wrong path” taken, that this path away from the possibilities of a “Vineland the Good” (*Vineland*, 322) necessarily involves the suppression of democracy, and that this suppression, imposed by an unseen “elect” element by way of its “creatures” (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 237), who do their bidding to advance their own interests and ambitions, requires a mechanics of thinking (or ideology) that turns people toward totalistic, systemic thinking.

This argument is one that *Gravity's Rainbow* posits. What *Vineland* adds to it is specificity. Pynchon accuses America of using fascist techniques to control its population, and in doing so locates the pacification of America as an issue related to the attractions of fascism. The fascism of agents like Brock Vond succeeded in turning the threat the late 1960s democratic movements posed into an opportunity to suppress future significant opposition to the “system” altogether. By 1984, then, Reagan had found a tool to totally impose official ideology on the population. Invoking Nazi Fascism, as a specific type of totalitarian ideology, intensifies the political project of *Vineland*. Pynchon illustrates this by showing how the democratic movements of the late 1960s fell victim to their own contradictions – their belief in utopia led to the idealisation of a state of democracy, which introduced a systemic element to the democratic movement that worked against the ad-hoc project, as the early Counterforce recognised it, and



reintroduced the possibility of authoritarian power. Members and fellow-travellers of the radical movements apparently needed to envisage a perfect society that contrasted with the deficient one they revolted against. This allowed the Government to turn “radicals” back to membership of a system that is more solid and so seems more comfortable to them. By 1984, that need for stability had enabled the government to render much of the population docile. This does not necessarily mean the production of fascist-like personalities like Vond’s will cease under the new form of fascism Reagan has successfully imposed. Pynchon does not explore the violence the spectacle’s total presence in society might contain; Bret Easton Ellis certainly does, only, as is not the case with Vond, the victim of this personality in *American Psycho* is random and arbitrary. In *Vineland* this is only hinted at, with America described (in toto) as a “law enforcement apparatus” (354). On the whole, though, *Vineland* is more interested in how America got to this point.

While it would seem on the surface quite enough to demonstrate that America has become a totalitarian society merely at a more technologically advanced state to those represented in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where the systems of the West, Russia and Germany all rested on the logic of systemic thinking and were all consistent with Their aims, describing the phenomenon as fascism adds an emotional resonance and directness: it provides a shorthand for political comment. It also opens the novel to a field of study, which applied to the signifiers of fascism in the novel can produce the possibility of a future democratic resistance to Their world. I will explore this set of counter-meanings in later chapters.

Set in 1984, *Vineland* is ostensibly the story of a young girl’s rediscovery of the mother who left her in infancy. The mother, Frenesi Gates, abandoned Prairie in order to go into witness protection. Now, prompted by the sudden and unexpected return into their lives of FBI agent Brock Vond, Prairie’s father Zoyd Wheeler entrusts his daughter to an escape with her boyfriend, punk rocker Isaiah Two Four. While on the run, Prairie is able to find out why Vond is important to her parents (he and Frenesi were lovers, and he persuaded her to betray the revolutionary movements she belonged to). This partly explains why Vond is coming after Prairie now. Vond’s latest activities eventually lead to a reunion between Prairie, her mother and Zoyd.

Vond, it turns out, is the agent not only of official and right-wing state control, but also of fascism itself. In this book, the battle is specifically a retrenchment of the right against the left. The novel contains a pocket allegorical history of twentieth century American radicalism and its failure. This failure, Vond himself theorises (albeit using some questionable tools), comes about because of a nostalgia, or a need for order:

What really got his attention was the Lombrosian concept of 'misoneism'. Radicals, militants, revolutionaries, however they styled themselves, all sinned against this deep organic human principle, which Lombroso had named after the Greek for 'hatred of anything new.' It operated as a feedback device to keep societies coming along safely, coherently. Any sudden attempt to change things would be answered by an immediate misoneistic backlash, not only from the State but from the people themselves – Nixon's election in '68 seemingly to Brock a perfect example of this. (272-3)

Lombroso's "undeniably racist spinoff from nineteenth-century phrenology" (272) suggests that their desire for order is a prerequisite to "society" as we understand it: society as a coherent entity that sutures over the differences it necessarily contains. Vond's own place in the novel, however, places racism and fascism into the centre of social life.

Pynchon can be uproariously unsubtle about Vond's fascism – at one point Brock's FBI limousine takes off from his PREP camp leaving tire-marks in the shape of the SS insignia (274)! Frenesi herself is quite aware that her attraction to Vond is actually attraction to the power of fascism: "since her very first Rose Parade up till the present she's felt in herself a fatality, a helpless turn toward images of authority, especially uniformed men... As if some Cosmic Fascist had spliced in a DNA sequence requiring this form of seduction and initiation into the dark joys of social control" (83).

The best way to understand Vond is by using a construct of Klaus Theweleit, the "Soldier Male". Vond is a figure of reactionary masculinity; Theweleit sees fascism as a radicalised construct of male separation. In Theweleit's study, the fascist psyche is defined by its fear of femininity (1989a, 70-84; 183-204). This phobia is structured in binary fashion: symbolically, a solid, unchanging rock is masculine, while chaos, fragmentation and corporeality are gendered female. And the metaphors that pervade this

symbolic structure are hierarchical: masculinity is an ideal that is developed in high culture, which to the fascist is the only sort of culture there is. To a fanatical fascist, culture is a rarefied thing that exists in a pure state somewhere above. Below resides the feminine – real life with its floods of bodily fluids and chaotic desires (1989b, 45-52). Below too, exist the body's nether regions, the sites of sex and defecation, of pleasure and animality. Culture raises the fascist above this baseness, denying the nether regions and their functions. The fascist sees a chaotic softness in the world. Everything floods, washes and oozes around him, whether it be the proletarian, unsculpted masses, or soft-bellied democracy; all this reflects the out-of-place substances from within his own body (which secretly disgust him). The disgust he feels about the inner chaos of his body is "hallucinated" onto the external world, so where there are groups of people interacting with the world, the fascist sees streams, torrents, wash, oozing flows of waste, of softness he associates with femininity. So he constructs his body as a dam, and hardens it. He dams two sorts of internal flow, his body fluids, and the undifferentiated flows of his desire, all to protect him from the "mire" of the outer world. He compares himself with a rock in a stream, impervious to its soft surroundings, or to a locomotive ploughing through a flood. When his body is combined in military formation with other bodies of the same type "totality machines" result – the unit, the army, the nation (223). The hardened formation defines culture, and it's the only beauty the fascist recognises. In this way, the arrangement of the soldier's political body is aestheticised to the farthest extent. An ego construction based on (mis)recognition is resultantly under huge amounts of strain, and its release is inevitable.

Such a release, as the above suggests, is played out as a release by a male against femininity. Theweleit examines the considerable literature produced by the men of the proto-fascist *Freikorps* "soldier males" and notes the fantasies they indulge in of penetrating and killing sexual women. These women disgust the soldier male: their sexuality is perceived as an abject flow that has the potential to envelop and drown him. These are in fact his own repressed sexual desires since his sexual desires, if they were allowed to be channelled outward toward normal libidinal resolution, would preclude the martial psychic arrangement that makes him a soldier male. He attempts to create and change his world in a way that makes this disgusting "other" no longer exist – his

masculinity depends, narcissistically, on a radical closure from an other which it does not recognise and which is therefore utterly foreign and threatening. Why this is so can be easier to see if we look at how European males were conditioned by their cultural milieu to associate categories such as fragmentation, mortal bodies, chaos and base substances with femininity.

There was a major trend at the beginning of the twentieth century for writers and scientists to regard femininity as a dangerous threat to men. They advocated men close off from “others”, “others” usually cased in the terms of race or gender. Bram Dijkstra (1998) shows how members of the Western masculine elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came to believe that sexual contact with women drained them of their manhood. Through a detailed (if selective) study of the period’s popular culture, and its popular interpretations of Darwinian biology, Dijkstra shows how male fears of femininity actually constructed perceptions of threats from other races (261-309). Scientists hypothesised that semen was the male essence, a pure form of blood, and that it provided not only for reproductive potential but intellectual and physical health as well. They concluded that the production of semen was aligned to the production of brain-matter, and that semen that was not ejected from the body would be recycled by it, with physically and intellectually beneficial effects (55-62). This, of course, would only happen if the semen was retained to be recycled, and so there was a widely understood prohibition against ejaculation in some circles (72). (This provides history with a literal ideology of the sort of fluid control and damming Theweleit talks about). Women who were sexually aggressive, therefore, became threatening to them – to men their mission was to drain them of masculine power (90-96). Hence any group that seemed to desire the power of the male elites seemed to them to be like sexually aggressive women. Dijkstra explains the tendency for “others” to be represented as feminine in the culture of the time (he shows how the Jewish people were increasingly feminised in the 1920s by German and American film-makers): that this was so common suggests how precarious traditional patriarchal interests felt their position to be.

In *Vineland*, Vond’s dreams reflect the cost to him of a very similar masculine construct. In one dream, Brock has to secure a mansion he is charged with guarding, a fortress easily seen as a hypermasculine construct: “it was his job to make sure that all

doors and windows, dozens of them everywhere, were secure, and that no one, nothing, had penetrated” (275). This construct echoes the importance of the castle to the *Freikorps* (Theweleit 1989a, 86). In his dream, Vond becomes aware, or always was aware, of the “madwoman in the attic” of the mansion, which happens to be his “watchful, never quite trustworthy companion personality, feminine, underdeveloped” (275), a repressed femininity which Brock imagines will fall on him and rape his masculinity, killing “him” if given any freedom (275).

Importantly, the feminine threat here comes from within the masculine construct. Brock’s masculinity comes at the price of repressing his feminine interior, and also at the price of his own fear of sex, and hence his desire to turn sex into power. Brock uses sex throughout the novel to manipulate people, usually Frenesi, but other lovers as well, and he has a fantasy of forcing Frenesi to perform fellatio on him at gunpoint in front of an entire compound of left-wing political prisoners. These prisoners are feminised: “the long-haired bodies, men who had grown feminine, women who had become small children[...] ...the sort of mild herd creatures who belonged, who’d feel, let’s face it, much more comfortable behind fences” (269). These people are thus Brock’s “companion personality”, just as the uniformed fascist is Frenesi’s – the forbidden desire for dissolution into the feminine left haunts the fascist just as the desire to be contained by the masculine fascist haunts the radicals. For Brock this desire, to be raped by the left-wing/feminine interiorised other, is so forbidden that he must defeat it by absolute control over that other – the parameters of sex, for instance, must always be drawn by its being an assertion of Brock’s power. This mix is familiar: sex as murderous penetrative act; fear of sex, fear of femininity are all attributes of the *Freikorps* in Theweleit. The act of rape/fellatio here would be an equivalent to the soldier’s act of penetration/annihilation of a woman leading a demonstration, this act of violence forcing the others in the crowd to flee, or in this case, to accept re-education. The results are the same too: order under the creative gaze of the soldier, and his absolute mastery of the situation once his borders reform.

Vond’s confrontation with the feminised members of left-wing movements in the novel comes when he subverts a fictional 1960s uprising at a California college. Provoked by a violent police crackdown on some marijuana smokers, the students seize

control of the campus and secede from the United States, naming their fledgling state the “People’s Republic of Rock & Roll” (PR<sup>3</sup>). Although this state of affairs is tolerated for a time by the government, this is more so they can rehearse the revolutionary movement’s collapse, organised by Vond, than because they were prepared to tolerate the republic.

PR<sup>3</sup> was founded at the “College of the Surf”, a university that served the moneyed families of two of California’s most conservative counties. Quite accidentally initiated during the raid by mathematician “Weed” Atman, who was tall enough to see what the police were doing to some of the students and so had a “law-enforcement epiphany” (207), the republic was soon in the grip of a cult of personality. Its declaration of independence piqued the interest of Frenesi Gates and “24fps”. Its arrival, though, represented the beginning of the end for PR<sup>3</sup>, because by then Frenesi was already in the process of being “reconditioned” by Vond.

The people of the revolution unwittingly aided Vond and Frenesi by committing “the basic revolutionary mistake” (229) and retaining hierarchy (and hence structure) in the form of a leadership principle, “a classically retrograde cult of personality” (205). They were “more devoted the louder [Weed] screamed at and insulted them. ‘Yes, my guru! Anything – chicks, dope, jump off the cliff, name it!’” (229) – they were “like ducklings looking for a mother” (229). Rather than committing themselves to the labour of extending their democratic enclave, they submit to their desire to be ruled, something Vond seizes upon to destroy the fledgling republic:

Brock Vond’s genius was to have seen in the activities of the sixties left not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it. While the Tube was proclaiming youth revolution against parents of all kinds and most viewers were accepting this story, Brock saw the deep – if he’d allowed himself to feel it, the sometimes touching – need only to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family. The hunch he was betting on was that these kid rebels, being halfway there already, would be easy to turn and cheap to develop. They’d only been listening to the wrong music, breathing the wrong smoke, admiring the wrong personalities. They needed some reconditioning. (269)

Hence, in its unconscious desires for order and for a father-figure, the left was quite closely connected to the right. The example of Frenesi’s attraction to uniformed men is a case in point. These desires are for her “repressed double,” characterised by self-

alienation, of a similar kind to that found in fascism. As she approaches a revolutionary “ideal”, an ideal absolutely other to fascism, unconscious desires for order start to manifest themselves. “24fps”, being a purist organisation, installs an ideological belief in purity in its members. From there it is only the *content* of that totality that needs to be decided, and this is what Vond is able to work on, to “recondition”.

### *Liminal Processes Favouring Totality*

Vond has discovered a way of exploiting the “fascist longings in our midst” (Chow, 1995) so that social control of this sort can be engineered. This is analogous to a process the Soldier Males in Theweleit’s study experience, and will form a vital component in my discussion about how Pynchon and Ellis suggest resistant strategies within a postmodern context, because the flux of a postmodern environment is able to produce this as a survival strategy among its sense-flooded subjects. As Theweleit puts it, “the monumentalism of fascism would seem to be a safety mechanism against the bewildering multiplicity of the living” (1989a, 219). This bewildering multiplicity has the effect in a fascist personality of causing them to harden like a monument, a statue or a rock or an ice block. These processes are the ones I alluded to in Chapter two, where the “Zonal” “chaos” might produce in people an unconscious nostalgia for strong forms. I’ve provisionally called these phenomena “Liminal Processes Favouring Totality”.

These are phenomena that can be observed when a subject encounters something “other” to him or her in ways that make the borders between them dissolve so that the subject loses his or her sense of stable selfhood. However, when this process is complete, the subject is found to have formed or reinforced a defensive armour against that very other. This is because of a culturally produced fear of this “other”, based upon a belief that it has the power to fragment and contaminate the self (or to drown it or wash it away on tides of desire). Subjects of these processes thus come to resemble total systems themselves, systems with no connection to or recognition of their “others”. In contemporary culture, encounters with “liminality”, a state of hybridity that radically opens the borders of the self, often seem to favour totality. This is due to the Spectacle’s promotion of narcissistic conceptions of the ego.

The ego, when it is formed upon narcissistic lines (such as those described by Lacan in “The Mirror Stage”), encounters the “other” as a totem of narcissistic crisis, and the usual reaction to this is for the subject of such a crisis to increase their defences against it. This is because the narcissistic ego recognises no “other”: any presence of the other threatens the integrity of the self, and so presents itself as a crisis, an “agency panic”. A narcissistic personality produced by a (totalitarian) “fascist” culture is a total selfhood politicised aesthetically as whole and pleasing and superior in every way to a foreign other it does not recognise. Hence the formation of the “I” as it occurs in the mirror stage is characterised by Anthony Easthope and Kate McGowan as a paranoid structure:

[i]n the I, as in the specular image, the subject seems perfectly to master its own lack. But the apparent solidity and permanence of the ego [its totality] must be constantly maintained against all that risks making it come to pieces. As Freud noted that in dreams a building may mean the dreamer, so Lacan suggests that the I is like a fortress which must constantly defend itself through denial... of everything that threatens to undo it. But then everything does. The I, then, is a paranoiac structure, likely to release aggression against whatever reminds it of its own unreality. (1992, 244)

In this conception of the ego’s origin, such a result seems inevitable. The formation of the ego is dependent upon the mistaken identification of the surface (a reflection or representation of the surface, in fact) for the whole. This means that the “ideal” “whole” self depends upon an image of a part (a fragment that is “out there”): the very opposed “others” that “threaten to undo” the ego are what holds it together in the first place. Hence, forming a stable self brings the ego into proximity with an other the self desires.

Totalistic ideologies, as we shall see, manage this event to produce conditions for their own success. A Liminal Process Favouring Totality re-channels desire away from any potential a liminal subject has to accept its connection with the other. Instead, this desire forms into a desire for totality, for the ego to be strengthened and extended by a social totality. This helps the individual ego feel both connected with something other (libidinal cathexis is exercised toward the higher ideal of the social totality, and hence the tension all this causes can be controlled) and remain narcissistic. While the tension may appear to have been eased, in fact it has merely been sublimated into a narcissistic



totality. It will continue then to build, making its future release necessary. This release comes about in the form of aggression against the other. With the *Freikorps*, this aggression is sublimated into aggression against official enemies – the soldiers are conditioned so they will explode into battle. Confronting an enemy, the soldier “dissolves” into them while killing, displacing the discharge or release normally reserved for sex (which expresses a dangerous libidinal attachment to the other) into the act of annihilating the other (1989a, 204, 1989b, 176-85). This represents a victory against the other, and so adds another brick in the wall of the total castle. The tension is thus restored, able to be used again when a victory over an enemy is required.

So, as the process runs, a subject is (or feels) confronted by an other, which narcissistic construction renders threatening. Boundaries break down between the self and the other (this is the liminal stage of the process), whereupon the other is defeated and annihilated, or cancelled out in some other way (the self disconnected radically from the other). This is a liminal structure as it was identified by the anthropologist Victor Turner in the 1960s. The process he described was a ritual process in which social transformations took place by a participant’s surrendering of the boundaries of their self, so that it was, once the ritual concluded, re-established in a new social configuration (1967). The word “liminal” refers to this transitional period, the point at which borders blur as the one and the other thing intertwine.

Nazi Fascism and other totalitarian systems use liminal processes and the fear of fragmented states they encourage, to reinforce existing social configurations and armour-plate them<sup>1</sup>. The (totalitarian) “fascist” subject merges identity with its other because it provokes narcissistic crisis, and is then able to allow the (totalitarian) “fascist” to radically reinforce its own integrity, rather than become reconfigured socially. It is for this reason that totalitarianisms are often regarded as extreme forms of conservatism. This process of armouring, however, unalterably changes the social, as any inherent flexibility it had as a conservative configuration is eliminated. Thus, as well as extreme conservatism, (totalitarian) “fascisms” are radical in their attempt to preserve the structure of social control, and as a result they look very different from what came before

---

<sup>1</sup>Georges Bataille’s essay “The Psychological Structure of Fascism” also appears to support this structure: for Bataille it was the “heterogeneous” elements of society that produced the fascist movements, but once in power, they became exemplars of social “homogeneity” (see Bataille, 1985).

the “crisis” that inaugurated them. This crisis is one brought about by technology and the effects it can have upon the body.

Vineland: (totalitarian) “fascism”

As I have indicated, *Vineland*’s accusations of fascism range wider than merely the personality of Brock Vond. Vond and his drug-enforcement cohorts are explicitly identified as fascists, the government and Brock are seen as a continuum by the left-leaning Ditzah and DL, as they explain to Prairie:

“Why would he [Brock] come after us? Is he trying to roll back time? What is it that’s so hard for him to live with?”

“Turn on his past like ‘at, don’t know, Ditzah, sounds too weird even for Brock.”

“Then again, it’s the whole Reagan program, isn’t it – dismantle the New Deal, reverse the effects of World War II, restore fascism at home and around the world, flee into the past, can’t you feel it, all the dangerous childish stupidity – ‘I don’t like the way it came out, I want it to be my way.’ If the President can act like that, why not Brock?”

“You always did look at things more historically. What I just figure is he’s a mean mother fucker, that’s a technical term, and a lot of these MMF’s as we call ‘em tend to be spoilers which if there’s something they can’t have, or they know they’ve already lost, why, they’ll just go try and destroy as much as they can anyway, till it’s over.” (265)

Ditzah’s comment here explicitly labels the American government fascist, and the narrator would appear to support this. America’s anti-democratic impulses can be seen in the novel’s continued government harassment of “alternative lifestylers”, in the ease with which the FBI is able to entrap citizens in order to manipulate them, and in its desire to control the spread of certain ideas (“the wrong music” for example). The overthrow of PR<sup>3</sup>’s democratic revolution (it was democratic for an euphoric while anyway, until it was turned authoritarian) is, for instance, compared to CIA interference in Chile, where the U.S. helped overthrow a democratically elected Marxist government by sponsoring a coup by a military/neo-fascist regime. This comparison is introduced surrealistically: during one of their last nights together, Frenesi awakens to hallucinated voices emanating from Weed’s sleeping face. In what might be called “predictive guilt”, Frenesi hears the

sounds of a card game, one she didn't know at the time (it was still in the 1960s, perhaps four years before America supported fascism in Chile), but one "years later" (238) she was able to identify as "pinochle", a name that suggests a pun on Augusto Pinochet's CIA-supported rule over Chile, beginning in 1973. Not only are the American government "restoring fascism at home" by turning America into a giant "law-enforcement apparatus"(354), but overseas as well, in places such as Chile (and, of course, Vietnam, which is nonetheless conspicuous by its absence in *Vineland*).

Also belonging to the first category are the methods of control displayed by this new wave of American fascism, the "machinery" that Nixon set up and Reagan has at his disposal (264). At first this machinery was traditional to totalitarian regimes: Brock runs a "PREP" (Political Re-Education Program), where the ex-hippies and political dissidents from the left are seen (in the words of N. Katherine Hayles) as "errant children" (1994, 19). This recalls the fascist mechanism of removing the role of parenting from the family, and thus making the family itself redundant. Theweleit showed how children in the Third Reich were often beaten by fathers who had lost their parenting role (and authority) to the Party (1989b, 252-3). Hence, because Pynchon sees this America as fascist, he makes families problematic throughout *Vineland* – alienation between children and parents is one of the novel's themes. Brock has broken up Prairie's family and has put systems in place to make sure they do not reunite – this is the function of Zoyd's "public display of madness" which opens the novel: it earns him a government cheque and allows Vond to monitor Zoyd's whereabouts. Late in the novel, Brock even tries to convince Prairie that *he* is her father. Vond's control over Frenesi also breaks her away from her left-wing parents Sasha and Hub, and hence, politically, away from the left, while DL and Prairie's friend Ché both come from and periodically escape their violent, argumentative parents.

Vond capitalises on the naivety of the students of PR<sup>3</sup> and manipulates them into betraying their friends, lovers and leaders, before using them to help America manipulate a generation into betraying its ideals. If in *Vineland*, as Eric Solomon argues, 1930s left-wing struggle and innocence, represented by Frenesi's parents and grand-parents, is betrayed by the anti-Communist blacklists of the 1950s, then the perhaps flimsier idealism of the 1960s was betrayed by the 1980s (Solomon 1994, 164). At least, by

1984, any semblance of left-wing radicalism seemed to have disappeared and to Pynchon it was undermined by the 1960s, so that the sixties in a sense betrayed its own. This is the vital difference, in fact: Hub Gates might have been assaulted by company goons on the picket lines, but at least he was able to retain his integrity: they took his body but not his “soul”, so to speak. Sixties betrayal was more insidious because it turned revolutionaries of the left into, not defeated revolutionaries, but into revolutionaries for the right.

Hence Pynchon is able to produce an historical understanding of how the revolutionaries of the 60s generation might become “fascists”, and by analogy how other revolutionary movements in the past have transmuted into repressive, armoured regimes. Here, a narcissistic crisis is managed to create a fantasy of the body in pieces, so that a desire for safety, for order, is felt. The citizens of PR<sup>3</sup> display their susceptibility to Liminal Processes Favouring Totality in their own naivety, by seeking to name their republic after “the one constant they knew they could count on never to die” (*Vineland*, 209), and by choosing a father-figure (Weed Atman), an act displaying a need to follow and admire someone. Hence they have betrayed a fear of disorder, of decay and death – of the personal and social body in pieces – and have addressed this by putting themselves in the hands of a protector who can keep them together.

However, when it was made to seem that Weed betrayed their trust (after being framed by Vond and Frenesi), he was murdered, and this unrest causes the end of the revolutionary ideal. The republic has “come apart” – their worst fears are realised, and they are susceptible to an alternative and stronger (and hence ultimately more attractive) totality, official America. The other leaders of PR<sup>3</sup>, such as Rex (Weed’s actual murderer) a revolutionary idealist, have already retreated from the ideal of power for the people into a contempt for the people. While Rex is never actually turned, his predictably authoritarian behaviour is easily used by Vond. Frenesi sums up his thoughts when she describes what ought to be a democratic movement as something that instead demands absolute conformity from its participants to the ideal of the revolution:

You’ve been living on the same planet as all of us – every night they pick us up, and they beat us, and they fuck us, and sometimes we die. Don’t any of you kiddies understand, we either have 100% no-foolin’-around solidarity or it

just doesn't work. Weed betrayed that, and it was cowardly because it was easy, 'cause he knew we can't shut anybody out, down the end of that road is fuckin' fascism, so we take 'em all, the hypocrites and double agents and summertime outlaws and all that fringe residue nobody else will touch. That's what PR<sup>3</sup> started out as – so did we for that matter, remember? The All-Nite Shelter. The lighted doorway out in the Amerikan dark where nobody gets refused? Weed remembers. (235)

She manipulates the naivety of the group for the purposes of exactly what she argues against: shutting out. Her evocation of the myth of "America" is therefore apt: she is working for Brock here, as America closes its doors on democracy in all but name. Hence she pinpoints the fear of the other in the revolutionary grouping: when it becomes a bordered state with leaders and orthodoxies, it requires conformity, and the other is regarded as a danger to the community. Frenesi convinces Rex's friend Howie that Weed is "one of them"; has already convinced Rex (he already harbours personal enmity towards Weed), and so they naturally conclude that this other in their midst must be purged or they will all be destroyed. The students at PR<sup>3</sup> don't understand it yet, but they have revolted into a form of fascism themselves, they've closed that door. Weed, meanwhile, starts to be seen as feminine by Frenesi and Rex: rather than being fully committed to the cause, he, "practising humane revolution" (229), was scattered, preaching, "wallowing in the everyday" (229), a softness which disappoints Rex. Weed is also defined by his sexuality (which is wild, not "in control" [237]) and by his tendency to become "hysterical" (237). Frenesi, meanwhile, as she becomes more "fascist", loses touch with "the everyday": "as if on some unfamiliar drug she was walking around next to herself, haunting herself, attending a movie of it all" (237). Frenesi is losing her feeling, becoming anaesthetised: "even sex was mediated for her now – she did not enter in" (237).

Weed, Frenesi assures Brock, will be condemned "whether he lies or whether he confesses" (240), and he receives what amounts to a show-trial (Frenesi and 24fps will be filming it) worthy of Stalin's Russia. And Rex wants nothing short of a lynching: "We're in sudden-death overtime" (235), he says. This confirms what Brock said to Frenesi: "sooner or later the gun comes out" (240), confirmation of Brock's insights into how the

revolutionaries are prone to favour order and conformity. Brock, of course, is all too happy to provide the weapon, and to make Frenesi, as an irreversible act of betrayal, plant it for Rex to find and use. After the murder, Nixon's army invades and PR<sup>3</sup> is destroyed, with most of its former citizens "re-educated" into becoming "useful citizens" – their psychic need and desire for order exploited, so that they can be assimilated back into a national family, led by a powerful father (first Nixon, then Reagan, in cahoots with the demands of the spectacle itself). That this eventuality is inevitable is signalled from the start by the daunting presence of a statue of Nixon at the fledgling republic's border.

Here, it might seem, Liminal Processes Favouring Totality allow the fascists to win, to subjugate the population, so that the passive ones spectate while power is accumulated away from them and they eventually become victims of the need for that power to be exercised. An arbitrary, violent exercise of power against groups and individuals by the footsoldiers of the system on behalf of those who occupy the positions of power is one characteristic of (totalitarian) "fascist" systems. In the next chapter, Pynchon's and Ellis's depictions of the actions of these footsoldiers suggest that for them, this arbitrary violence is the case with America as well.

## Chapter five

### Armoured Egos on the Rampage

*I saw a Werewolf  
Drinking a pina colada at Trader Vic's  
And his hair was perfect*

-Warren Zevon

#### *Psychic armouring in Gravity's Rainbow*

Liminal Processes Favouring Totality appear to have two distinct types: those that render subjects passive and unable to form a political response or even see the need to do so, and those that induce subjects, such as Brock Vond and Patrick Bateman, to form a defensive armour around the "system". Theweleit describes how a Soldier Male regards the interior of his body as frozen matter which he unconsciously cannot recognise because it represents the "other", an other he instead recognises in the environment (1989a, 198)<sup>1</sup>. Here, an armoured (totalitarian) "fascist" system might form a similar structure: a population frozen, as it were, into place, surrounded by an armoured skin of footsoldiers, both sides of the dichotomy equally created by the same system. As (literally) the repressed material of the system, the pacified population might become an enemy to be disposed of if the system comes under sufficient threat of dissolution; Vond and Bateman, despite being members of the "armour" that forms the outer edge of the system, actually battle members of their own population, not an external enemy. This chapter describes how these armoured personalities behave.

That fascism is an important theme in *Gravity's Rainbow* appears obvious, and as with *Vineland*, its portrayals of fascist consciousness are not restricted to Nazi Germany. Raymond Olderman described *Gravity's Rainbow* as "at least, in part, a history of Nazi consciousness and a demonstration of how that consciousness is potentially common to everyone" (Hite c1983, 110). It is set during and just after World War Two, and the narrator takes pains to make sure readers realise that the historical forces of this

---

<sup>1</sup>Theweleit rejects the Freudian term "projection" as being inadequate to describe this phenomenon, because what the soldier-males experience are not fantasies but "hallucinatory object-substitution[s]" (1989a, 155) that create a reality experienced by the soldier males.

consciousness that lead up to the war were certainly not resolved by the Allied victory. Fascist Germany is described as a “corporate state” (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 419), the implication being that its underlying political and social systems are thus not much different from the allies’, who integrate corporate structures into their economies. In fact, a direct comparison between the cultures of America and the Nazis is made when AWOL Slothrop hides from some American MPs. Slothrop “for possibly the first time is hearing America as it must sound to a non-American. Later he will recall that what surprised him most was the fanaticism, the reliance not just on flat force but on the *rightness* of what they planned to do... he’d been told long ago to expect this sort of thing from Nazis, and especially from Japs[...] but this pair outside the door now are as demoralising as a close-up of John Wayne (the angle emphasising how slanted his eyes are, funny you never noticed before) screaming ‘BANZAI!’” (256).

Elsewhere Pynchon notes that the war was fought, not for a victory of right over wrong, or for freedom, but for “commodities” and “technology”. “Technology as a source of power” (578), as in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (ibid), is identified as a fascist dream people have of a perfect society. This is brought up to date, where beneath the surface of the postindustrial, seductive mediascape (the “Rocket State”), in a late, future-set episode, “it can get pretty fascist in here, behind the candy-colored sweet stuff is thermodynamic elitism at its clearest” (678). In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Liminal Processes Favouring Totality enable the advance of the ideology of structure, and of the totalising interests of the elect. They ensure violent responses to the unstructured other, and cause paranoia in general among the novel’s characters.

There are a number of examples of Liminal Processes Favouring Totality that lead to violence evident in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. One, involving the fascist Major Weissmann, AKA Captain Blicero, is related by a peripheral character, Thanatz. Blicero “had become a screaming maniac”, according to Thanatz. “Things were falling apart, and he reverted to some ancestral version of himself” (465). His eyes had become “the colour of a statue” (465). Later, from Greta Erdmann, Thanatz’s wife, we learn that Blicero “had grown on into another animal... a werewolf... but with no humanity left in its eyes” (486). This is Weissmann/Blicero’s reaction to the fragmentation of his control – things were



“falling apart”. He hardens, becomes less of a human, more statue-like, or like a werewolf (possibly when he was exploding as he would in battle).

Of course readers of *V.* will remember that Weissmann worshipped the proto-fascist von Trotha, the instigator of that novel’s account of German genocide. This episode recounts a massacre of Hereroes, an event which is also summarised in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, as it forms background to the “Zone Hereroes” place in the novel. This massacre, which Pynchon suggests was the holocaust in rehearsal (*V.*, 245), exemplifies the creation of an ordered public space by the annihilation of the other within it, a process resulting from a Liminal Process Favouring Totality and which is described by Theweleit: “What the forces of terror aim to create is an empty square, *an empty space*.... With one fell swoop, [the soldier] eradicates the ‘odious demon’, the dangerous mass in which monsters lie waiting. Nothing remains to shower the soldier with spittle, to threaten him or rip him to pieces. The world is clean again: an empty space, untrod territory, a virginal body. The swarthy rabble gives way to a white totality. The man is *whole* again” (1989b, 34-5, Theweleit’s italics). As Theweleit has it, this white totality is “a desire reach[ing] its destination” (34): the fascist purifies himself of the polluting other, the otherness he displaces onto the masses, onto sexual females, that his armour has caged inside him. In describing the soldier’s reaction to the other, Theweleit describes a Liminal Process Favouring Totality:

In [*Freikorps* memoirist Ernst von Salomon’s] texts there is no such thing as an open enemy, an open front, an open street; a boundary. The battle is internal. Three times, Salomon locates the sites of battle “within” – within the body of “a single gigantic city” (the region is “bleeding”); within the body of the earth (the crater); and within the man himself, as his body armor – the “respect for the law”... “hammered” into him – dissipates and crumbles. Precisely because it has been “hammered” into him, and remains external, his body armour can now be cast off to allow his emotions to erupt with all their true intensity. His body armor crumbles in confrontation with “the wild, primitive instincts of the earliest hunters, the hunted animal.” Initially, the fighting man himself is both hunter *and* hunted animal; he inclines toward self-mutilation; he is *always* at war with elusive enemies. But the moment the enemy comes within his grasp, the boundaries between his two personae lose their fluidity. The devils of hell have been gnawing at his liver, mashing his entrails to a pulp, but the moment the devils enter the open, his enemy is as good as dead. The blood of his victims must be made to flow free; how can they know that he rediscovers his boundaries only as a killer

wading in blood? He bathes and purifies himself in blood; to call battle a “bloodbath” is then clearly appropriate (at least for the man who takes it). (38)

For the fascist soldier, the interior of the body is, as we know, corrupt, associated with the dead matter of the lower bodily stratum. This includes his “‘inner life’, the state of his inner drives” (20), which he experiences as “a separate entity, completely divorced from him” (ibid), or totally other. Weissmann, of course, has typically Nazi reactions to his body: “I want to break out”, he tells Gottfried, “to leave this cycle of infection and death. I want to be taken in love: so taken that you and I, and death, and life, will be gathered, inseparable, into the radiance of what we would become...” (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 724). He would rather abandon his polluted earthly body in favour of a transcendence into a radiantly pure “one” – a “blinding one”, one without other. Similarly, Tchitcherine’s enmity toward his half-brother Enzian comes from a fear of the other within: as Geli Tripping tells Slothrop, he “thinks of Enzian as... another *part* of him – a black version of something inside *himself*. A something he needs to... liquidate” (499). Tchitcherine’s desire to liquidate suggests a desire to purge or remove this “dead matter” – Hereros were supposed to have been destroyed by Germans, not become them – an enemy other he associates with his interior. This is a part of him he feels he’d be better off without: it is not really a part of him at all, it is something else.

The opposition between self and other in these fascists corresponds to two others: “the ‘mass’ against ‘culture’, ‘high’ against ‘low’. ‘High culture’ is seen to be threatened from ‘below’” (Theweleit, 1989b, 43).

In the writings of the soldier males, the concept of culture becomes a rock against which to break the feminine, contagious lust, dissolution – all the threats the mass contains. It is assumed as a matter of course that the Jews are not a “cultured people.” For that “individual,” a number of truths thus become self-evident. The man of culture believes, for example, that he can never be a “barbarian”: he has a sense of existing at a great height above the ground, of having no connection to the depths of femininity. So vastly superior does he consider himself to be to the depths below that even mass human slaughter cannot make him a barbarian. It remains an act of culture. Such an act would demonstrate lack of “culture” only if he were to defect to the “mass”, to become, say, another democrat in the crowd, the rabble. Mass murder is in no sense considered antagonistic to the

soldierly/masculine concept of culture (nor indeed does the latter surface only under fascism); on the contrary, if the world is to be formed as a landscape of culture, then it is seen as necessary to erase anything uncultured from the face of the earth – one way or another. (46)

Relations of domination are stabilized through the encoding of our thought with the antitheses “masculine/feminine,” “controlled/uncontrolled,” “Precise/vague,” “external/internal,” “conscious/unconscious.” Anything “low” is seen as wrong, simply *because* it occupies a subordinate position. The individual of “higher culture” demands something “down below” that he can oppress as a means of actually redeeming totality and bodily wholeness. (52)

This process and its attendant relations of cultural domination can be seen in Frans Van der Groov’s mania for killing dodos on Mauritius in the 16th century, in a dream episode quite early in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The dodo was a bird that the imperialist European settlers could not find a divine use for; for them it fell outside culture. Because of this, they acted upon their desires to kill the birds until their extinction. The hunters themselves could not quite understand this impulse, but this is because the impulse came from a psychological need to destroy evidence that their divine world might not have total purpose. As Douglas Keesey notes about this episode, “The Dutch ‘make sense’ of these seemingly unrecognisable animals by treating them as enemies of sense; the unknown other is ‘understood’ as a threat to be eliminated, a threat to the order of the Christian universe and to every individual Christian dependent on that order...” (1986, 86). The quote Keesey chooses to illustrate this brings Pynchon’s concerns here back into terms we understand from Theweleit:

To some it made sense. They saw the stumbling birds ill-made to the point of satanic intervention, so ugly as to embody argument against a Godly creation. Was Mauritius some first poison trickle through the sheltering dykes of Earth? Christians must stem it here, or perish in a second Flood, loosed this time not by God but by the Enemy. The act of ramming home the charges into their musketry became for these men a devotional act, one whose symbolism they understood. (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 110)

To those with investment in such a worldview, one breach opens the way for chaos (in the form of a heaving mass). This gives the enemy living space (the enemy always occupies the place of the other – in Theweleit it is represented by proletarian/Jewish

women (1989a, 70-79), here by dodos). Both are threatening because they might engulf the soldier male, whether fascist or Dutch Christian; as such the threat must be liquidated. This is actually a fear of the enemy within hallucinated onto the environment, something Pynchon appears to understand well.

Another early episode in the novel concerns a proxy fantasy of Pirate Prentice's. This fantasy is of a giant adenoid, a delusion which had been obsessing one Lord Blatherard Osmo. Osmo is temporarily required elsewhere in the interests of British imperialism, and so Pirate, blessed with the ability to experience other people's fantasies in their place, has taken on the adenoid assignment. For Osmo to do his imperialist duty, and hence be of use to Them, he must first be relieved of his desires to connect with this abject interior. Osmo's interior is melting – the repressed is returning. The adenoid in Osmo's/Pirate's fantasy grows out of control for a while, but is eventually stabilised (at the cost of several historic and government buildings) although it throws communications within government into chaos. Having drawn a circle around London, and become "as big as St Paul's" (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 14), the adenoid is related to "a new preterition abroad in England here that throws the Home Office into hysterical and painful episodes of indecision" (15) so that "no one knows *what* to do" (15). Hence the other within is again associated with the "Enemy", the preterite, and so this other falls on the side of the negatives in Theweleit's equation: "uncontrolled", "vague", "internal", "unconscious". The Adenoid's snotty noises act with the full horror of abject substances on those present, so the army is brought in to deal with this amorphous, hyper-corporeal and proletarian threat. Unfortunately, it defeats the army in its "full battle gear" (15) by "wip[ing] out the entire observation post with a deluge of some disgusting orange mucus in which the unfortunate men are *digested* – not screaming but actually laughing, *enjoying* themselves...." (15). These men are considered "unfortunate" because they have failed to remain above the pleasures of the low. The anxiety felt by the narrator, possibly speaking from Pirate's point of view, at the prospect of being engulfed by the enjoyable, delightfully low substances of both the corporeal and social body is tangible. Here a group of soldier-males are engulfed by a flooding, oozing other, an internal substance which is associated with an external enemy. It is the anxiety at this that pushes the liminal moment of the adenoid's border-crossing into a need for totality and control. The

adenoid, even when “stable”, represents “uncertainty” of communication and hence of control, an uncertainty shared by the authorities with regard to the people or the preterite. Finally, it is controlled by means of cocaine by some neo-Freudianists, who shovel the drug “into the germ toxins bubbling nastily inside its crypts” (16).

Of course, this is all a fantasy, but it is a fantasy that needs to be controlled by those in power. Osmo is swallowed up, assimilated by this other, and, despite his fantasy being eventually managed so he can still work at his interventions in Balkan affairs, the “Firm” eventually have no further use for him. In the end, then, they allow him his desire for the feminine other; finally he is “discovered mysteriously suffocated in a bathtub full of tapioca pudding, at the home of a Certain Viscountess” (16). The (totalitarian) “fascist” elect thus arranges to prove that dalliances with the feminine-identified other result in engulfment – death by drowning. Here the distance and proximity of the ruling classes to their “other” plays itself out: Osmo’s unconscious fantasies are deadly yet seductive, while the emergence of the creature from the aristocrat’s nose (and its association with how his speech sounds “adenoidal” to “preterite ears” [Weisenburger, 22]) suggests that the aristocracy retains an indefatigable association with the unclean and uncivilised. Not that the aristocracy is identical to the elect in *Gravity’s Rainbow* – Osmo is a pawn just as Slothrop and his friends in the Counterforce have been. But Osmo’s aristocratic heritage provides an instance where Pynchon shows how the other that has been passed over on the way to power will always come back to haunt those who try to discard it in their lust for power. The genuine elect are as affected by this as their ambitious pawns.

### Everything can be consumed

Set in New York during the late 1980s, *American Psycho*’s depiction of a late, spectacle capitalist environment amplifies the spectacle totalitarianism of *Vineland*, which was published shortly before and set a few years earlier. In *American Psycho* the commodity overtakes identity: there are quite literally no people in this book, only brand names. Ellis uses this depiction to show how (totalitarian) “fascist” consciousness, alive and well in the world of the stockbrokers that populate the novel, even if it has no

specific ideology or program to take hold of, is not divergent from the ideologies of capitalist success. In many ways, *American Psycho* is about a class of privileged males who feel that to survive, they have to assert a strong, competitive identity. They must become like this to be the vanguard, as the highly “successful” are the new “armoured” class in this environment. Because commodification has literally infused itself into every area of life in this environment, the commodity has become the best place the “I”, the identity of the men in the book, has to establish itself and its right to survive. As such, identity rests upon something very flimsy, commodities and commodified images, things able to be bought and sold, that may be merely image and nothing more, and that are subject to radical change. This makes reinforcement in a strong (ideological) mirror a necessity for them. It is why, I will argue, the (totalitarian) “fascism” of the stockbrokers in *American Psycho* is located at the heart of this late-capitalist environment: this environment, produced by capitalism, in tandem with the totalistic ideologies of capital and spectacle, produces Liminal Processes Favouring Totality. The way Patrick Bateman behaves, it is either that or drift into a radical negation. The fear he has of this negation explains why he is not passive as the Tube’s subjects in *Vineland* are – negation to him is equivalent to *Vineland*’s sort of preterition. Bateman is privileged and sees himself as elected, as superior, and so to defend his position, he must defend the system that puts him there.

He has thus totally internalised the logic of the commodity. Whenever someone enters a room Bateman describes what they are wearing, *according to brand-name*. Here is a random example:

Dibble is wearing a subtly striped double breasted wool suit by Canali Milano, a cotton shirt by Bill Blass, a mini-glen-plaid woven silk tie by Bill Blass Signature and he’s holding a Missoni Uomo raincoat. He has a good-looking, expensive haircut and I stare at it, admiringly.... I am wearing a mini-houndstooth-check wool suit with pleated trousers by Hugo Boss, a silk tie, also by Hugo Boss, a cotton broadcloth shirt by Joseph Abboud and shoes from Brooks Brothers. (63-4)

Descriptions of this type are offered almost every time someone is pointed out by the narrator. It doesn’t matter whether this person actually takes part in the action, or whether they are merely sitting at a bar, or standing alongside a Wall-Street broker

Bateman thinks he knows. These descriptions are in lieu of the narrator actually describing the person wearing the outfit. Rarely is Bateman interested in doing this, because everyone who is important to him looks the same anyhow: they all wear expensive suits and shoes, usually in accordance with complex rules and grammars of dress (discussed at great length whenever Bateman and his colleagues are socialising, which is frequently. These discussions must be attended to, and homework done, because the stockbrokers are prone to bouts of knowledgeable one-upmanship and testing). Also, they all have the same expensive haircut, they are all young and white, and they all wear designer-rimmed glasses, whether they need them or not. They all keep meticulously clean. They all work out extensively. The only times the narrator actually describes what someone *looks* like is when they fail to meet these norms, and even then we get only snatches of description: a homeless "bum's" eyes (which Bateman blinds), some grey hair, a beard, Blackness, Iranian-ness, Armenian-ness, Jewishness, Chinese-ness, or slightly-overweight-ness (especially if Bateman is describing a threatening woman).

This sort of commercialised detail also prevails when Bateman tells us of his day-to-day activities. The health club he belongs to is typical:

In the two years since I signed up as a member, it has been remodelled three times and though they carry the latest weight machines (Nautilus, Universal, Keiser) they have a vast array of free weights which I like to use also. The club has ten courts for tennis and racquetball, aerobics classes, four aerobic dance studios, two swimming pools, Lifecycles, a Gravitron machine, rowing machines, treadmills, cross-country skiing machines, one-on-one training, cardiovascular evaluations, personalized programs, massage, sauna and steam rooms, a sun deck, tanning booths and a café with a juice bar, all of it designed by J.J. Vogel, who designed the new Norman Prager club, Petty's. Membership runs five thousand dollars annually. (67)

In a similar vein (I'll stop doing this soon) Bateman describes his getting-up routine:

Then I squeeze Rembrandt onto a faux-tortoiseshell toothbrush and start brushing my teeth... and rinse with Listerine. Then I inspect my hands and use a nailbrush. I take the ice-pack mask off and use a deep-pore cleanser lotion, then an herb-mint facial masque which I leave on for ten minutes while I check my toenails. Then I use the probright tooth polisher and next the Interplak tooth polisher (this

in addition to the toothbrush) which has a speed of 4200 rpm and reverses direction forty-six times per second; the larger tufts clean between teeth and massage the gums while the short ones scrub the tooth surfaces. (26)

And on it goes – quite literally: the paragraph this quote is taken from doesn't finish until most of the way down page twenty nine. Consumption is, for this man, emphatically, conspicuous. Bateman is never slow to boast to others about what he owns, nor is he slow to purchase things he feels he needs to own, even if they are profoundly redundant: "I buy two copies of my favourite compact disc, Bruce Willis, *The Return of Bruno*" (151); he buys *Playboy* from the news-stand even though he's already received his subscription copy; at another point he buys "the new Stephen Bishop" album in all three formats, "the compact disc, the cassette, and album" (98). He does this to prove to us how powerful he is in a world in which consumption is everything: he has more and better possessions than we all do, and has the ability to purchase – it does not matter what so long as he can immediately establish a superior position to us by doing so.

In fact, Patrick Bateman indulges here in what might be called a pornography of ownership. His domain extends from the Toshiba TV and video equipment and crystal ashtrays and other things he doesn't need, to his ownership of people's images – he is a viewer of pornography; he tapes and stores the scenes of his torture-murders – to people themselves, particularly women. He objectifies women in the traditional sense, reducing people to comments about their bodies. Moreover, he assumes physical ownership of the prostitutes he hires, to the point of reserving the right to "damage" them. And he has a ownership-relationship with his secretary, Jean, over whom he can assert power because he is her boss, and because he exploits her feelings of affection for him. Bateman believes that he ought to have everything within his grasp, which is why he brutally murders a colleague, Paul Owen, in a fit of calculated jealousy because Owen "owns" the esteemed "Fisher Account" that Bateman covets. This belief of Patrick's extends to the text itself, as Tanner has pointed out: "value is established by a narrator who owns the means of representation in much the same way that the capitalist owns the means of production" (107).



American Psycho: postmodern novel

*American Psycho* is at every level about living with and in the postmodern spectacle. As in Ellis's earlier *Less Than Zero*, the spectacle is all-pervasive: Bateman gazes interminably – at women, at the homeless, at posters, at television, at videos, pornography, magazines, clothes, food (he actually eats very little of the nouvelle cuisine he orders), consumables. His presentation is cinematic; he presents his torture-murders in cinematic/pornographic mode too: Tanner points out that when Bateman kills one of his victims, Bethany, she turns around “like in a movie”, and she is presented with “the gloved hands”, rather than “my” gloved hands (*American Psycho*, 245), an effect which places Bateman himself into the mode of spectator to his own actions (Tanner, 109). This is something he can be at will anyway, as he films his murders and can play them back for his own pleasure. It is even possible that we are being narrated through the video of Bethany's murder during this scene, rather than the murder itself. If this were the case, and if the murders are fantasies, then Bateman tends to fantasise video images. In fact, the scenes of his worst tortures tend to have been set up for just such representation, as he frequently lights them up with halogen lamps to simulate the set of a pornographic film.

In this book's environment the orthodox descriptions of postmodernity apply. The book is filled to brimming with commercial images, with simulacra, with playful hybridisations (an “Italian-Thai” restaurant [63], for instance, exemplifies the cultural borrowings and playful juxtapositions of postmodernism), with such a rich sensual environment that a kind of schizophrenic distraction is caused, in the way that Fredric Jameson describes. This can be seen in the way time loses track of itself in the novel. Chapters called “Breakfast” or “Morning Meeting” are followed by “Lunch” or “Afternoon”, but it soon becomes clear (by what Bateman is wearing, or who he has with him at the time) that the “Lunch” that follows “Breakfast” might be on another day (Young, 101). Time passes in circles here: there is no progress in the stockbrokers' lives, just rounds of restaurants, bars, night-clubs, drugs and tired sex.

This, too, is postmodernity combined with rabid corporate capitalism. The gap between the rich and the poor is continually being emphasised, with the stockbrokers always tormenting the homeless on the street (Bateman's first act of “on-screen” violence

is to blind and beat a beggar). All of the principal characters are connected with the young urban elite in the corporate world. Status, to this sect, is bound up in conspicuous consumption – in the public act of ownership. That this is so important to these people can be seen in the amount of psychological investment they all have in possessing the best things: Bateman becomes childishly jealous when he finds that several people have more impressive business cards than he has; he becomes childishly vindictive when a social inferior turns out to have a superior brand of stereo unit to his, and so on.

The confusing environment Bateman exists in represents the fragmentation of his psyche. Several times he loses himself in a state of commodity distraction:

J&B I am thinking. Glass of J&B in my right hand I am thinking. Hand I am thinking. Charivari. Shirt from Charivari. Fusilli I am thinking. Jami Gertz I am thinking. I would like to fuck Jami Gertz I am thinking. Porsche 911. A sharpei I am thinking. I would like to own a sharpei. I am twenty-six years old I am thinking. I will be twenty-seven next year. A Valium. I would like a Valium. No, *two* Valium I am thinking. Cellular phone I am thinking. (81)

I make no comment, lost in my own private maze, thinking about other things: warrants, stock offerings, ESOPs, LBOs, IPOs, finances, refinances, debentures, converts, proxy statements, 8-Ks, 10-Qs, zero coupons, PiKs, GNPs, the IMF, hot executive gadgets... Inclusivity, envying somebody's life, whether someone could survive a fractured skull, waiting in airports, stifling a scream, credit cards and someone's passport and a book of matches from La Côte Basque splattered with blood, surface surface surface, a Rolls is a Rolls is a Rolls. (342)

### Bateman's "ego maintenance"

Ellis, though, suggests strongly that this "typical" ludic postmodern environment contributes to the development of an overtly (totalitarian) "fascist"-type personality. In the above description, the mixture of distraction, a suggestion of real-life danger, and its connections to the conditions of modern life feed into the schema for fascist management Buck-Morss has outlined. These people are anaesthetised, undergoing ego-hardening against the chaotic environment they are in. They belong to social totalities, which are like exoskeletons, more protection against a world that constantly threatens their

disintegration. And the Liminal Processes Favouring Totality they experience can cause them to commit appalling atrocities.

Characters continually see and hear reports of danger through the media. Tim Price reads from a newspaper: “In one issue – *in one issue* – let’s see here... strangled models, babies thrown from tenement rooftops, kids killed in the subway, a Communist rally, Mafia boss wiped out, Nazis... baseball players with AIDS, more Mafia shit, gridlock, the homeless, various maniacs, faggots dropping like flies in the streets... kids who broke into a zoo and tortured and burned various animals alive... building collapses on baby... bridge collapses – ” (4). Here even the privileged classes are proletarianized: Price and Bateman are subjected to psychological shock through the media just as workers encounter it in factories, or (in Walter Benjamin’s example), as any one might feel when confronted with crossing a busy city street (with the potential for death or serious injury registering in the brain with every passing car [1970, 250]). These newspapers imply that everyone is vulnerable to the play of violent and dangerous forces in New York. The sensationalism of this media barrage makes it seem that danger is all-pervasive, that death or dismemberment might be around any corner, taking the form of “maniacs”, “Nazis”, “AIDS”, or collapsing buildings.

As if to confirm this impression, all of Bateman’s group hire videocassettes – returning them is everyone’s stock excuse for leaving somewhere early – in abundance. If even a percentage of his colleagues have a similar taste in films to Bateman (he’s rented *The Body Double*, which depicts a woman drilled to death, thirty seven times) then they will watch a feast of on-screen carnage as well. This type of entertainment registers yet more shocks to the synaesthetic system, as violations of the human body are presented as spectacle. The *corps morcelé*, or fantasy of the body-in-pieces, is right there on the screen in front of them. If a narcissistic episode results from these shocks, it leads to the sensorium numbing, and retreating from the world into the self, effectively armouring the borders of the self against the outside: a Liminal Process Favouring Totality.

Additionally, hyperreal spectacles act as accelerated phantasmagoria, presenting the subject with too much information, too much sensory data to comprehend, numbing them by distraction. This sense of numbness comes across in Bateman’s narration, where the syntax distances himself from his actions (the narration of his actions while he

commits murders is often a simple recount of events, ‘this and then this and then this’). Such techniques represent Bateman’s retreat from the world, the closure of his synaesthetic system on its external circuitory components. Just to complete Buck-Morss’s schema, the stockbrokers in *American Psycho* indulge in narcotics as well, particularly cocaine and its derivatives (“Bolivian Marching Powder”[200]). Their drug-taking can be seen as a relatively understandable reaction to the culture they are immersed in, for when the sensorium is subjected to this many shocks, it must numb itself in defence or it could suffer considerable damage.

No wonder, then, that Tim Price finds several stories regarding Nazis in his newspaper. The environment he and the paper exist in produces numbed and hardened subjects, ones analogous to the (totalitarian) “fascist” subjects discussed by Foster, Buck-Morss, Theweleit and others. The dangers present in the environment, coupled with a wash of phantasmagoric media imagery, create a need for subjects to protect themselves against them. The fragmentation and wash of postmodern life are analogous to Theweleit’s conception of the *Freikorps*’ forbidden desires, externalised into the environment. This “feminised” “soft” environment promises a dissolution of the subject which the Nazi must absolutely, violently refuse. During his periods of “madness”, Bateman often gets the feeling that he is in some senses “not there”, that there is something indefinite about himself. This lack of definition is resisted brutally by Bateman, who asserts his own reality by imposing terribly upon the reality of “others”. In behaviour comparable to that of Theweleit’s *Freikorps*, Bateman compulsively opens his victims up, revealing their interiors, and revealing the reality of the interior the fascist tries to deny in himself. The fascist tries to conquer the “miasma” inside him by reducing his “other” to miasma, and by surviving this process intact himself – he remains hard and intact, while the “soft” “feminine” “other” is reduced to pulp, proving the fascist’s superiority because he is still whole, still alive.

This is only the most extreme of Bateman’s “ego-maintenance” techniques (Theweleit, 1989b, 210-25). Another is his continued return to the mirror phase, enforced by the culture’s continually throwing people situations of narcissistic crisis. Not long after Price reads from his newspaper, Bateman finds reassurance of his wholeness in a mirror at Evelyn’s place – “‘Hi. Pat Bateman,’ I say, offering my hand, noticing my

reflection in a mirror hung on the wall – and smiling at how good I look” (*American Psycho*, 11) – but he doesn’t need a literal mirror. Mostly Bateman finds reassurance in other stockbrokers. He mentions them whenever he sees them, and tries to work out who each of them is, because they all tend to look the same. If they are dressed according to Bateman’s rules and they are in safe territory, such as Uptown New York, or in a trendy restaurant or nightspot, they provide him with a reassuring image of his own wholeness, and he becomes more confident as a result.

Thus Bateman forms part of what Theweleit calls a “social totality” (1989b, 223). The fascist cannot live in the real, feminine world for long, or he finds himself disintegrating. To avoid this, he becomes part of an armoured social grouping that helps to protect him. Bateman and his near-identical colleagues admit no others into their social sect: when Evelyn invites the artist Stash and his girlfriend Vanden to dinner, Bateman and Price are appalled by their looks, dress, behaviour, and relieved when the two of them leave. They and Evelyn find it exciting that Stash has HIV and is likely to pass it on to Vanden, their deaths thus being assured. The stockbrokers remain together, armoured against outside influences. They are all white, all young (in their twenties), all wealthy. They are all what Bateman and Price call “hardbodies”.

“Hardbodies” literally means what it says, hard of body. Usually in *American Psycho* it is a term which comes under the sign of the gaze to describe women who have worked on their body and ironed out everything soft and “imperfect” about it. But it also describes the stockbrokers themselves. Literally, they are armoured subjects: they work out with weights at their health clubs, keep aerobically fit, do stretches, all to chisel their body into something that resembles the Aryan ideal to be found in fascist art. The stockbrokers’ bodies and psyches are moulded and hardened to perfection; all the better to resist the softness of their environment (Theweleit’s image of a steel locomotive charging through choppy water comes to mind here [1989a, xviii]). Discipline is insisted upon: they must appear immaculate, and this is achieved with a set of almost military disciplines of the self. They dress according to a set of rigorously enforced rules – enforced by peer pressure (Luis Curruthers tends to be ignored or treated with contempt when he breaks these rules, which amounts to “breaking rank”). This can be seen as a move to aestheticise a broadly political organisational imperative: the aesthetics of the

hardened body and its appearance establishes the social group's identity as a totality with its own politics of inclusion and exclusion and set of prescribed behaviours. This totality itself forms an elite which has as part of its interest the continuation of post-industrial capitalism, the postmodern spectacle, and the conservation of structures of domination in its society.

It is at this intersection between postmodernity and capitalism that (totalitarian) "fascism" is re-energised. People are interpellated into a (totalitarian) "fascist"/late capitalist ideological schema which effectively ensures the survival of domination through rigid power hierarchies. The prevailing culture creates a general need for people to continually return to the mirror phase so that they feel themselves autonomous subjects, their ego maintained. The noise of culture is one aspect of this. Alice Yaeger Kaplan explained how the aural mirror phase, "echolalia", can be a seduction into fascism (1986, 9-11). In media-saturated cultures voices always whisper at people; advertising continually talks to you. This vocal environment is one aspect of Kaplan's argument that "oceanic" "mother-bound" feelings, ones that wash over you, are as important to understanding the attractions of fascism, the desires that led to the establishment of (fascist) totalitarian bureaucracies in government, as "straight-edged" authoritarian "father-bound" ones are to how they operate once in power (23-4). In Bateman's case, because the spectacle is a single-directional medium, there is never the chance for him to say no, as Patrick needs to (he tells Jean to "Just say no" [*American Psycho*, 64] several times), meaning that mirror stages are never quite left behind (Kaplan, 9), and thus the maturity the characters should have moved into (Young, 94) is never achieved because identity away from the maternal voice is never established.

Similarly, the Lacanian mirror phase is returned to, as we have seen, making the ego confront the pre-symbolic maternal and reject it over and again. This is why the wash of postmodern imagery is constantly seen by (totalitarian) "fascism" as feminine, and why the borders and hierarchies differentiating the masculine and the feminine, and more generally self and its other, and privileging the first term of each binarism, are re-established in the most emphatic manner possible. The postmodernist return to the "feminine", to softness and indeterminacy; its blurring of borders and its freeing-up of "other" voices, is managed with the result that the opposite of these things comes to be:

hardened egos, hardened meta-discourses, social totalities. The hard ego is forced to confront its repressed other through the retroactive fantasy of a body in pieces and in order to survive this possibility, the ego hardens, strongly reinforcing its borders.

This is like the moment of abjection for Kristeva, where the abject substance (a Kristevan reading of Theweleit might have the Soldier male “ab-jecting” all that is not in their schema of totalities) causes a moment of fascinated ego-loss in which the pre-symbolic is “visited”, before borders get re-established with a physical jolt – you pull back from the abject substance as you are establishing your radical otherness to it (Kristeva, 1982, 2-3, see 192 below). This is despite the fact that abject substances usually come from *within* (3). This Liminal Process Favouring Totality is what happens to the soldier male as he confronts the proletarian other in a public space. He is seduced, fascinated by this demonstration of his potential fragmentation (the masses represent the inner disorganisation of the soldier’s body [see 1989a, 385-405]), and experiences blackout, as his ego becomes dissolved momentarily by his proximity to them. It is during this time his killing takes place as he re-establishes his boundaries with his body-armour and its extensions. The structure is the same in each case: seduction-fascination/loss/emphatic identity re-establishment. It is (totalitarian) “fascism’s” survival mechanism that its imperatives of denial (of the “soft feminised other”) are impossible to achieve, for this means that there will always be an enemy to confront, always be a fantasy of the body in pieces, and thus it will always be necessary to armour the body and ego, setting ideological splitting into concrete. This keeps going until there is nothing more to destroy.

### *The system dines out*

The first time readers witness Bateman out of control it is over a trivial incident. Bateman has just been defeated in a contest of business-card aesthetics. Worse, he has been beaten by David Van Patten, someone who he considers a social inferior within his group. When he realises that even Price thinks Van Patten’s card is better, he becomes “dizzy” (*American Psycho*, 44). Not long after, he is still experiencing a state of loss (his turns out to be the most mediocre of all the cards proffered) and his sure sense of self is

clearly threatened by this state of affairs, to the point where he feels compelled to strike out and re-harden his ego:

“... snapper pizza... red snapper pizza... “ Then McDermott slams his hand on the table, rocking it. “Goddamnit, isn’t anybody listening to me?”

I’m still tranced out on Montgomery’s card – the classy coloring, the thickness, the lettering, the print – and I suddenly raise a fist as if to strike out at Craig and scream, my voice booming, “No one wants the fucking *red snapper pizza*! A pizza should be *yeasty* and slightly *bready* and have a *cheesy crust*! The crusts here are too fucking thin because the shithead chef who cooks here overbakes everything! The pizza is dried out and brittle!” (46)

Bateman strikes out using the rules that his social totality follow, which act as an extension of his ego/body armour. Unless these rules are followed when producing the object, it is “brittle”, which means that it is subject to fragmentation. Such brittleness has connections with the abject – the cook is a “shithead” – and so threatens Bateman. By shouting at McDermott, he strikes out and destroys in response to a threat to his stability, re-establishing that stability with his emphatic enforcement of law. Immediately after undergoing this Liminal Process Favouring Totality, Bateman is once again assured of his physical wholeness and social standing: he describes himself as “handsome” (47) while calmly bribing a waitress to ignore other customers’ complaints if the stockbrokers decide to smoke cigars.

Like the proto-fascist *Freikorps* analysed by Theweleit, Bateman experiences blackout as he kills. He recounts what he does to one victim, “rip[ping] open her stomach with my bare hands. I can’t tell what I am doing with them but it’s making wet snapping sounds and my hands are hot and covered with something” (305). This description is followed by a gap in the text: what happens next is only described from the point of view of “The aftermath” (305), the next day:

What’s left of both bodies is in early rigor mortis. Part of Tiffany’s body – I think it’s her even though I’m having a hard time telling the two apart – has sunken in and her ribs jut out, most broken in half, from what’s left of her stomach, both breasts having been pierced by them. A head has been nailed to the wall, fingers lie scattered or arranged in some kind of circle around the CD player. One of the bodies, the one on the floor, has been defecated on and seems to be covered with teeth marks where I had bitten into it, savagely. (306)



Here Bateman has no actual memory of his actions. Even when he claims he performed an action, it is an assumption based on the appearance of tooth marks. He comes to with “no fear, no confusion” (305), very clear-minded, even to the point of covering his tracks by writing “I’m back” on the wall of the apartment he broke into so he could murder these prostitutes. Before meeting these women, Bateman was “having a difficult time containing my disordered self” (301). During the “tryst”, one of the girls disturbs Bateman even more by telling him a bizarre story about a job she had once taking care of a client’s monkey who would only watch *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. By the end of this story, Bateman can hardly talk, and his self has become so diffuse that even sex with the prostitutes takes on an aura of irreality, which is the state where one is unsure if events are real or not: he describes it in the language of pornography (“The two of them come, yelling simultaneously, in a sixty-nine position. Once their cunts are wet enough I bring out a dildo and let the two of them play with it. Torri spreads her legs and fingers her own clit while Tiffany fucks her with the huge greased dildo, Torri urging Tiffany to fuck her cunt harder with it, until finally, gasping, she comes” [303]), and as if it were pornography – “Sex happens – a hard-core montage” (ibid). Bateman’s lack of presence before the murders have taken place is quite at odds with his self-assurance after he has come to. The structure of his violence here is very similar to his breakdown over the “brittle” pizza: his self recedes from him; he feels fragmented, not quite all there, so he gets close to his “other”, commits violence upon it, strikes out exposing its abject status, close enough to it to black out with an abject reaction as he loses himself momentarily, whereupon his borders are reconstituted and his self settles. The American psychosis that forms the subtext of Ellis’s title is that the culture portrayed in the book is one of violence, and that subjects of this culture “find themselves” through committing violence against “others”.

### A rogue element

Bateman is a part of a social totality that defines itself by its ability to consume. As a cog in its machine, Bateman, and the totality as a whole, is inexorably connected

with consumer capitalism. They are part of its machinery in that as stockbrokers they enable the exchange of capital among the bourgeoisie, the creation of wealth out of nothing but wealth, the magical processes that happen at the top-end of capitalism. As individuals within this system, they continually consume. They buy clothes and electronics, concert tickets and art (often as an investment – these men have no idea about aesthetics, but they know the monetary value of all their possessions). Their consumption of food in restaurants allows two senses of the word to come into play: they both buy and eat the food, without paying attention to its production. Bateman literally consumes humans too. In the world of *American Psycho*, there is nothing you cannot buy. He buys sex from prostitutes, and in doing so, lures them to his apartment where he can kill them. Unwittingly, they have sold their lives to him. Towards the end of the book, some of his victims are consumed by him physically as well:

I spend the next fifteen minutes beside myself, pulling out a bluish rope of intestine, most of it still connected to the body, and shoving it into my mouth, choking on it.... In the kitchen I try to make meat loaf out of the girl but it becomes too frustrating a task and instead I spend the afternoon smearing her meat all over the walls, chewing on strips of skin I ripped from her body.... The head in the microwave is now completely black and hairless and I place it in a tin pot on the stove in an attempt to boil any remaining flesh I forgot to shave off.... I decide to use whatever is left of her for a sausage of some kind.... Maggots already writhe across the human sausage, the drool pouring from my lips dribbles over them, and still I can't tell if I'm cooking any of this correctly, because I'm crying too hard and I have never really cooked anything before." (*American Psycho*, 344-6)

Bateman's cannibalism has its correlative in his ability to buy women to satisfy other appetites such as sex and scopophilia, the consumption his social totality of stockbrokers defines itself by, and by extension the originary consumption of humans in Marx's schema – under capitalism the workers become something other to themselves as human agents: they become commodities, forced to sell themselves on the labour markets. An all-consuming logic runs from this point to this outrageous caricature of Ellis's, the literal consumption of human flesh as meat. In the episode outlined above, Bateman begins by not remembering how the "girl" got to be scattered around his apartment like this – he was blacked out at the time – and his explosion outward, his

drive to annihilate his “other”, had not been completed when he regained consciousness, still not “himself” (he’s sobbing “These are terrible times” [346], and “I just want to be loved” [345] in a “disembodied voice” [346]). The pressure on his subjecthood from the culture has become too overwhelming for him at this point in the book. His armour has cracked open; for the time being, maybe for good, his ego has fragmented, and he is vulnerable to the flowing “other” he fears. He is damaged and keeps threatening to dissolve completely, and so his violent defence mechanisms, his explosions and ego-maintenance techniques, continue.

It is while in this state that Bateman has his one real encounter with the law. He only becomes visible to the police now his armour has been weakened and while he is halfway loose from his social totality. When his ego-maintenance is working well, they leave him alone, unable to see him. The first time the police are mentioned in *American Psycho*, there is something amiss with them: “a police car cruises silently the wrong way down a one-way street” (5). Indeed the clues the murderer leaves amount to a one-way street of detection. Bateman seldom destroys the clothes he commits murders in; instead he has a dry-cleaner remove the blood. His dry-cleaner complains to him about the stains, and is presumably suspicious of them (these are professional cleaners – only Bateman’s racism, surely, can make him think that a Chinese cleaner cannot recognise a bloodstain when they see one). However, the fact Bateman asks a cleaner to remove large bloodstains never results in the police investigating.

Similarly, Bateman has his cleaner scrub his apartment and clean away blood, guts, bodyparts and brain after some of his murders. Bateman has another apartment where he dissolves bodies in lime, but this is never discovered. He takes bodies there wrapped in sleeping bags, catching cabs for transport. After he has killed Paul Owen, Bateman is stopped on the sidewalk while dragging away his victim’s remains (once again in a sleeping bag). His friends fail to notice his suspicious behaviour, asking him for “the general rules of wearing a white dinner jacket” (219). What’s more, Bateman knows he cannot be touched, he knows that the police are going “the wrong way” in regards to him. In the act of torturing his former girlfriend Bethany, he opens all the windows to his apartment and invites her to “Try to scream, scream, keep screaming...

no one cares. No one will help you... “ (246). Bateman is aware he can be careless, for he is invisible.

The police, of course, are an armoured social totality themselves. Bateman's abject status at this point in the narrative, his inbetween-ness as he drifts away from his social totality, makes him become visible. Normally Bateman chooses his victims from inside the capitalist machine: “restaurant whores”, prostitutes, business associates and so forth. There are exceptions to this general rule, but these victims – a “bum” who he blinds, a Japanese delivery boy he mistakes for Chinese, a small child – are in various ways minorities, marginal, and the attacks are executed with a certain amount of cunning. They are also attacked while Bateman still exists largely within his totality. (The exception to this, of course, is when Bateman kills the young boy at the zoo. At this time he is “unable to maintain a credible public persona” [297], but his cunning leads him to be careful in this situation [he isn't always] to avoid bloodying himself, and he pretends to be a doctor, thus managing to align himself with high-society long enough to escape. Bateman slaps the boy's mother, who is in hysterics – “for this I am given no disapproving looks” [300] – and a cop pushes him away as if he were just another member of the crowd.)

As the end of the novel approaches, though, Bateman finds he needs to explode with greater force than private killing might allow him and this makes him clumsier. Additionally, as we have seen, his ego-maintenance has failed him – he has been unstable for far too long by now – and this has caused him to become isolated from his social totality. Rather than attending restaurant or board meetings, or going into work, Bateman has at this stage “flipped” totally, spending his time prowling and killing. This is why the violence seems to accelerate during the second half of the novel: it is at this point that the pressure has become too constant for Bateman to bear. Bateman has become abject – between two social totalities, to one of which he would be a subject, to the other an object. Here, then, he is other to himself. It is always a response to evidence of his abject interior, or his ultimate affiliation to his abject “other” which gives him the imperative to explode outwards and annihilate.

In response to this need, he instigates the “Chase, Manhattan” chapter by shooting a young saxophonist playing on a streetcorner. For once things don't go as Bateman

plans: his silencer fails and he is seen in the act by a squad car. The police chase him, so Bateman hijacks a cab, killing the driver, before more police arrive. Bateman (in third person) engages in a gunbattle, several police shot or dying in an explosion, before he can run away, into (first) the wrong building, where he kills a night-watchman, and then making it into his own office building, signing in. During all this, Bateman cannot understand how he got into so much trouble; he does not understand that because he killed a young man, probably white, in public, he became visible for the first time: "I have no idea what I've done to increase my chances of getting caught, I shot a saxophonist? a *saxophonist*? who was probably a *mime* too? For *that* I get *this*?" (350).

By becoming isolated from his social totality he becomes visible in his crimes. The social totality is about power, which operates best while its processes are hidden, and it has many techniques to hide these processes within its collectivity. Bateman makes the mistake of exercising power while he is separated from his group, his unit. This is shown in the narrative by Bateman's privileged first person viewpoint being taken away from him – he's lost the right to it – and given over to a third person omniscient narration, the eye of God and the law. Bateman has made his unfair affinity with power too obvious, threatening his group's privileged place in relation to it. This act of Bateman's lies at power's borderland – it is a place where his and his group's "natural" right to power may wither under question. It becomes up to the law, normally the protector (through silence) of Bateman's power, to protect the status of the totality and power generally by removing the rogue element that Bateman has become. This encounter, though, provides him with a genuine battle, which allows his self the volume of explosion it needs to restore its boundaries. This is another explanation for the sudden intrusion of a third-person voice: Bateman has blacked out at this point, and cannot tell the story "himself". With his armour re-formed, he can re-join his social totality: by the end of the "Chase, Manhattan" chapter, Bateman has perpetrated a massacre, but is once again beyond the reach of the police, tucked up in his office building, one of the armour extensions of his social totality. With this his place as the narrator of the novel is returned. Bateman is no longer a rogue: he has vindicated himself through violence.

Much of the grimmest satire in the novel is set around this totality protecting Bateman. During one such instance, Bateman, having used Owen's apartment for a

subsequent torture-murder, wonders why he has never read about the bodies being found, so he goes back to the scene of the crime. He discovers that the apartment was simply cleaned up and prepared for sale by real-estate interests – an example of Bateman’s social totality absorbing and covering up his crime. In this way, the novel presents the high-capitalists as being complicit in Bateman’s crimes – simply by perpetuating their own interests they help him escape. This is because Bateman’s self, his ego, is paradoxically theirs as well. Theweleit sees that the ego of the soldier-male, in the words of Mark Seltzer, “might be shifted in the direction of the radicalised experience of ‘social’ organisation in the subject of violence” (Seltzer, 1997, 148). Seltzer then quotes this passage from *Male Fantasies* in relation to the serial killer:

The “ego” these processes seem to produce is admittedly a particularly peculiar formation: it can certainly not be conceived as a psychic agency pertaining to the person. It has, rather, to be understood as a social ego, a muscle-armor that is merely borrowed, painfully drilled into and fused onto the individual. An ego of the kind described seems likely to be incapable of escaping the danger of immediate fragmentation on contact with living life, unless it is inserted into some larger social formation that guarantees and maintains its boundaries. Any social organisation, from the family to the army, might fulfil this function, as long as it functions as... a “totality.”... The “ego” described here is unremittingly dependent on external support; if it breaks down, the ego in turn disintegrates. (Seltzer, 148; Theweleit, 1989b, 222-3)

Seltzer notes that it is this ego, one he terms the “social ego”, that is typically described in accounts of serial killers. It is like an exoskeleton on an insect, forming from the outside in. The serial killer, in Seltzer’s study, “‘fades back’, chameleonlike, ‘into society’” (148) by way of this exoskeleton, providing “a kind of behavioural skeleton – much like an insect – to provide an architecture for their fantasies and a structure for the violence that informs their conscious experience” (ibid). This is a killer “with a machinelike or devivified periphery: the man whose interior has lost its meaning in its utter dependence on the mechanical drills relentlessly binding him to external and social forms” (ibid). These are drills which create out of the late capitalist this hardened periphery, the structure of challenge and strengthening through violence which both forms and strengthens the ego-layer, the apparently endless series of narcissistic crises which are these men’s correct response to their environment.

Bateman disintegrates quickly when he becomes separated from his social totality, from his exoskeleton. While he is a part of it, though, he has the dazzling ability to disappear, to perform public acts of violence and then fade back into the crowd. Bateman covers his back when he kills Owen, pretending to be Marcus Halberstam, a colleague. When a private detective calls on Bateman, inquiring about Owen's disappearance, he informs Bateman that he (Bateman) was one of *Halberstam's* alibis for that night. Bateman's frame-up mistook somebody else for Bateman, just as Owen mistook Bateman for Halberstam. There are many other instances of mistaken identity among the stockbrokers throughout the novel. They all look identical because they all have the same social or behavioural "exoskeleton": it is the rules that they adhere to about look, and fitness, and grooming, and dressing, and the rules they adhere to about their masculinity, which bind them together as a totality. These rules come from myths which are either formed for the convenience of the structural continuation of late consumer capitalism, or are older than that but exist because they are convenient for the system.

Seltzer notes that the "motivation of stranger-killing becomes inseparable from the possibility of absolute 'ownership'. But this is an ownership that, in turn, becomes inseparable from the terrifying pleasures of an endless replication" (149). Hence the postmodern capitalism that *American Psycho* functions among provides the public space that a killer like Bateman can vanish into. He conforms perfectly, and so he vanishes. Further weight is given to this suggestion by the fact that Bateman frequently confesses his crimes, but is never believed – he left Harold Carnes a long message "admitting everything, leaving nothing out [!], thirty, forty, a hundred murders..." (*American Psycho*, 352), but later finds Carnes thought he was joking. "Jesus, Davis", he says to Bateman "Yes, that was hilarious... Bateman killing Owen and the escort girl?... Oh that's bloody marvellous. Really key, as they say.... I'm not one to bad-mouth anyone, your joke *was* amusing. But come on, man, you had one fatal flaw: Bateman's such a bloody ass-kisser, such a brown-nosing goody-goody, that I couldn't fully appreciate it" (387). Bateman is an "ass-kisser" to the late-capitalist "yuppie" ideology that lies behind his social totality, he is not an alien monster other to the society in which he lives. He kills to own, and he videos these killings to play back to his subsequent victims, victims who too are replications in that they are denied the subjectivity to be any different from the others, as

Tanner points out. The American psychosis thus works by reducing people to the level of the same, an “absolute identification” which can only be played out tyrannically (Seltzer, 149). They are the end point of an age of “mechanical reproduction”, where the aestheticisation of politics produces replicants defending the system against the latent potential of the passive masses. This is a violent hegemony that radically denies difference, and equally radically posits systems of domination and exclusion, so that only those who conform have a right to exist at all. It is this ability to split and bind that Kaplan noted about fascism (24; 33). Bateman’s hypermasculinity is a part of the binding process of a totality that can split from others and fortify itself. These (totalitarian) “fascist” subjects form an empty castle made of empty castles, a show of awful and utterly vacant strength against the undifferentiated matter of all “others”.



## Chapter six

### Cartoons: Diminished Representations?

*I want a photo-opportunity  
I need a shot at redemption  
Don't want to end up a cartoon  
In a cartoon graveyard*

-Paul Simon

From now on, the argument presented in this thesis will take a new direction. It turns just as the political problems the novels thematise are at their most extreme and their consequences at their most violent. Instead of pushing further into the carnage created by Liminal Processes Favouring Totality, I will instead focus on these processes' relationship to the cartoons that are also evident in the novels under discussion. This will be done by way of exploring the place of "cartoons" in current ideas and assumptions about representation. This change of direction is designed to be a tactical retreat rather than a surrender to the difficult material encountered in the last chapter. As I indicated in the opening chapter, an exploration of the almost abject aesthetic category of the cartoon, and how it functions both in the novels and as a metaphor for the world beyond them, can allow for a new reading of the political philosophy of the novels. In short, while the political problems are made comparatively explicit, the question of how to respond adequately is far more difficult to answer from the novels. Cartoons suggest one possible "we" system that has the potential to resist forming as a totality.

The method of constructing a political philosophy for *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland* and *American Psycho* I will employ is akin to deconstruction. This is because I will undertake a discussion of the central issue – of how a politics can be constructed from these novels that resists the extreme conditions they set out – by considering an aspect of these novels that appears to be utterly peripheral to their politics. Hence, in this reading the centre is to be found elsewhere from itself: its appearance and presence are separate from one another. However, as a deconstructive reading, it will collapse the opposition between the central topic and the peripheral one altogether – the opposition between politics (reality/high) and cartoons (aesthetics/low) will be shown to be

impossible to sustain. The operation of a politics that resists the political situation outlined in the previous chapters will come to depend upon its own representation in cartoon form, and cartoons will no longer be innocent of political or realistic significations.

In the following chapters, I will explore the representation of cartoons in Pynchon's novels, and also in postmodern culture generally. I will extend this, though, into an exploration of "cartoons", of what is often regarded as "cartoon" representation and "cartoon" narrative in general: the presence or citation of recognisable cartoons and more generally cartoonish elements, as well as being important in their own right, also form a kind of "preterite code", a code which suggests to readers that a certain "paranoid" reading of events might be in order. This would be a "cartoon" reading of the novels beneath the apparent reading. This code is similar to the one Katje recognises in *Gravity's Rainbow* when she views Osbie Feel's filmed invitation to her to join the Counterforce. In Feel's outrageous allegory, Their "scheme", which is played by a dwarf, is exposed as a construction, as being not-necessary to the world. Upon this demystification, "it vanishes, frightened, into the desert" (535). Feel believes that once people are shown that the majesty of Their world is an illusion, its power will collapse.

Any encoded "cartoon" reading of these novels must be highly unofficial because cartoons are "preterite" forms of culture, existing below the dignity of Their gaze. Thus, while over many years of academic reading, *Gravity's Rainbow* has been tamed enough for it to be admitted into the literary canon, readings of its "cartoon" elements remain comparatively rare. However, a "cartoon" reading, and "cartoon" readings generally, provide a method by which the "necessity" of Liminal Processes Favouring Totality can be eroded. This may not be the only set of metaphors capable of leading to a similar political destination in Pynchon's highly complex novels, but it is one gateway through which the texts appear to invite us.

What I want to do now is less to develop a definition of "cartoon" than suggest a series of senses in which the word is deployed. These will range from historical to modern descriptive (banal) usages of the word. By tallying what experts and dictionaries say about cartoons with what the word signifies today, we can see that "cartoon" is now a highly flexible, if loaded, term. Literally it signifies what we all know a cartoon to be, a

particular type of line drawing. Metaphorically, it signifies a reduced representation, something that is easy enough to ignore if it is kept in its place, but which becomes somehow dangerous if it transgresses into the domain of realism. Although this view is clearly limited, and defined by a bias toward realism, it is also highly informative for our purposes: the adjectives used to describe or denounce books and films with cartoon elements enable me to mount a demonstration of the importance of the cartoon as a way to understand culture and subjectivity in general.

Since Pynchon specifically evokes and alludes to cartoons, this definition will help us see how they may be meant to signify, as well as allow us to identify “hidden” cartoons in the texts. It will also clarify *American Psycho*’s status as a “cartoon”, and the reason why the postmodern, metafictional literature I mentioned in the last chapter can also seem cartoonish. This work can then be put to use exploring the ways in which some of the obsessions of this thesis – (totalitarian) “fascism”, hypermasculinity and postmodernism – are elucidated in connection with this group of representational phenomena. Hence, the chapters to follow will be explorations of the politics of “cartoons” and of the cartooning of character. To an extent this will be justified as being an (ironically) realist response to a postmodernist environment. As a part of this, some reasons for the ambivalence we saw in Pynchon’s use of cartoons will emerge – in fact this ambivalence will eventually sort itself into an ironically cased opposition which can inform the political responses we can construct from the novels under discussion.

### Historical meanings of cartoon

“Cartoon” has several related meanings, which together cover considerable ground:

1 a humorous drawing in a newspaper, magazine, etc., esp. as a topical comment. 2 a sequence of drawings, often with speech indicated, telling a story (*strip cartoon*). 3 a filmed sequence of drawings using the technique of animation. 4 a full-size drawing on stout paper as an artist’s preliminary design for a painting, tapestry, mosaic, etc. (*Concise Oxford*, 172; *Oxford Encyclopaedic*, 226)

This is pretty typical of the meanings you can find in the major modern dictionaries. In addition to this, we can add the sense of “cartoon” as it is used in popular critical discourse, and discussed more fully below – that is, two-dimensional, flat, or inadequate representation. Hence, a cartoon can be written as well as drawn, if this broader sense is considered. Indeed, the complaint that a character is a “cartoon”, by way of being a “cardboard-cutout character” reflects the root of the word, *cartone*, which is seventeenth-century Italian meaning “pasteboard” (*New Collins Concise*, 170). “Pasteboard” itself also has a second sense related to this usage, “flimsy or fake” (827), a connection which will become more obvious when we look directly at some book and film reviews that employ “cartoon” in this way. This sense can also be found in the word’s original use. While the original meaning of “cartoon”, dating from the Renaissance, does not of necessity imply the inadequacy of the object (collectors of Renaissance art sometimes favour the cartoon of a painting over the finished work), nonetheless its relation to later senses of the term is discernible. The Renaissance cartoon is preliminary, an unfinished drawing. It was used to help painters “[transfer] a design to a large rigid surface”, according to David Kunzle, author of an exhaustive history of early strips (1973, 2n4). All other forms of cartoon are in some way “unfinished” or transitional as well, in that dimensions are missing in the same way a Renaissance cartoon is missing paint. Hence they can be seen as “flimsy or fake”. This is because cartoons simplify an issue or exaggerate a limited number of features which can “type” the personal object of caricature or the situation in a cartoon. Although it is a preliminary drawing, though, that is not to say that the Renaissance cartoon is totally unformed: rather it represents the last stage in preliminary preparations for a painting in Renaissance studio practice. Hence while the cartoon is unfinished, it still has some sense of form. This too is the case with the modern cartoon: while not mimetically accurate, these representations should still be recognisable.

The modern usage of “cartoon” dates from last century. Winslow Ames and David Kunzle (1978), link modern cartoons to the category of caricature. As the use of “cartoon” in its Renaissance sense was declining along with Renaissance studio practice last century, it acquired the new meaning of “pictorial parody, almost invariably a multiple-reproduced drawing, which by the devices of caricature, analogy, and ludicrous

juxtaposition sharpens the public view of a contemporary event, folkway, or political or social trend” (909). Not that the phenomenon this word had come to describe was itself totally new – drawings with similar properties had appeared in various forms since at least the Renaissance (910). The modern cartoon developed, according to Ames, gradually out of caricature from the fifteenth century, (although Kunzle suggests that caricature did not exist before 1780 [1973, 426]). Other types of cartoons, such as panel drawings, similar to modern comic strips, can be dated back even further. (These were often not comic; usually they were drawn for instructional, political or religious purposes, and were sometimes extremely violent and highly serious). Before they were named “cartoons”, they were variously known as caricatures, lampoons, satires, mockeries, and broadsides. The newly-named cartoon contained elements of satire – as with caricature, which we will come to soon – the supposition was that the picture’s audience was sufficiently acquainted with its subject matter to associate this generalised distortion back to the original reference. Cartoons are also separated historically from caricatural satire because caricature deals with individuals, while cartoons lampoon groups and social trends and follies. Before long these distinctions became muddled and lost to the general public, and the term “cartoon” came to refer to a range of phenomena sometimes including strict caricature.

Caricature is the “distorted presentation of a person, type or action” (Ames and Kunzle, 909). In its orthodox usage, it is usually a line drawing. However, caricatures also have a history in the higher art of painting. Some caricatures that are canonical in the history of Western painting include, for instance, the grotesqueries of Hieronymous Bosch, as well as those of Agostino Carracci and Giuseppe Arcimboldo, who made recognisable faces up of painted arrangements of fish, birds, and books (910). The word itself is thought to derive from the Italian verb “*caricare*”, which means “to load, to surcharge, as with exaggerated detail” (909). Hence, caricature exaggerates features by which the subject is associated, or presents the subject as animal-like or vegetable-like. As with cartoons, caricatures exist in writing – the seventeenth and eighteenth century satires of Dryden, Swift and Pope, for example, are rich with them. Although not entirely new – the type of exaggerations or deformations we now regard as caricatural can be found in Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts – caricature came into its own in

the Renaissance, as a counterpart to the Renaissance's emphasis on the individual (910).

Cartoons, in their strict sense (and before they were named as such) also were reactions to Renaissance beliefs: they lampooned its emphasis on "order, symmetry and fixed canons of beauty" (ibid), developing grotesque types and travesties of Renaissance ornamentality. However, there is no way that the paintings of Bosch or Arcimboldo can be recognised as cartoons. Cartoons, although they may very well exaggerate in the manner of caricature, also economise, simplify, and encapsulate – they are more like sketches than fully worked paintings. Of course, some cartoons were still so detailed that they could pass for mimetic drawing – in the "cartoons of manners" from the sixteenth on into the nineteenth centuries, as practised by such figures as Brueghel, Callot, Gallot and Watteau, and described by Ames as "decorations", the two-dimensionality lay in the comment, as Ames and Kunzle imply, rather than the drawing technique (914). In the case of Hogarth, even this was hard to ascribe. His cartoons were sophisticated satire barely related to the notion of the cartoon as it is now generally known. From these heights, it is little wonder that the modern cartoon is so often used as a metaphor for disappointment and regression. But what Hogarth did for the cartoon was to bring humour into social satire, and this paved the way for the genuinely funny drawings produced by such figures as Edward Lear and the cartoonists in *Punch* and similar publications of the nineteenth century and beyond. It is here that the features of the modern cartoon can be found. The drawing styles progressively became more economical and simpler, and regression of subject to type became the norm.

In the twentieth century, cartoons have become one of the most prevalent cultural forms. Strip cartoons and animated cartoons both derive from the previous forms of cartoon and caricature in that they tend to be line drawings that contain exaggeration and distortion, and can also contain social satire. In fact the comic strip is a very old form of cartoon, recognisable (although they weren't comic strips *per se*) in pre-1550s German woodcuts (917). The comic strip itself came into being late in the eighteenth century when the broadsheet was fused with the comic in the form of satire (918). True comic strips retain their integrity as drawings, so that words, although they can be present in the forms of captions or speech balloons, should, according to convention, never dominate the drawings, or the strip becomes instead not a series of cartoons but illustrations. For

this reason, the drawings themselves must be linked into some sort of progressive structure, most commonly a narrative. In the case of the comic strip, this introduces the illusion of movement into the cartoon.

This feature is extended with the animated cartoon, which is essentially an animated comic strip. Both forms of cartoon have cells which, put together, form the illusion of movement. Of course, not all forms of animation are specifically cartoons: there is animated sculpture or painting. However, one of the important features of animation suggests that the cartoon may be immanent to animation generally. If this is the case, then it goes some way to explaining modern critical (often-banal) uses of the word. Here “cartoons” become a category describing a certain type of simplified representation or narrative in artforms often apparently unrelated to drawing, such as live-action cinema and the novel. This extension of meaning is suggested by Edward Small and Eugene Levinson in their essay, “Toward a Theory of Animation” (1989). The animator Norman McLaren used to like telling people (it was one of his mottoes):

\*Animation is not the art of *DRAWINGS-that-move* but the art of *MOVEMENTS-that are drawn*.

\*What happens *between* each frame is much more important than what exists *on* each frame.

\*Animation is therefore the art of manipulating the invisible interstices that lie between the frames. (68)

Of course, McLaren was interested here in animated drawings, but the same principles apply also to animated paintings, sculptures, photographs and cartoons. As well as being drawn, these are movements that are painted, sculpted or photographed. The animation itself, the mechanism that makes it move, lies in the gap between the cells, and hence, as Small and Levinson point out, the montage – cuts in live-action film (70).

It is the act of editing that makes an animation animate. What the animation has is the illusion of continuity, and hence the possible illusion of realistic movement and continuity. What animation is predicated upon, though, is a lack: the lack of “real” movement. The hidden truth is that animation is a fragmented process: movement is built through fragmentation, and the illusion is predicated upon what is not there. Cartoons too are predicated upon such a lack of realism, as we shall see, particularly cartoons as they

are now known. Take, for instance, the original meaning of “cartoon”, the preliminary of a Renaissance painting. This is a cartoon by virtue of its lack of being the finished painting: it lacks paint, or it lacks the context of the larger structure. It is the gap in the middle, the gap between the drawn lines where the paper shows, that distinguish it. It has form, and yet its form is not fully figured. Similarly, with more modern cartoons, what they lack is the real, or “the reality effect”. Caricatures and editorial cartoons are not only predicated upon the identifiable similarity between the drawing and its target, but on the distortion, the lack of similarity. It is at once formed and not formed in this way – it is formed enough to give the illusion of form, of similarity. But it is the difference that creates the effect of being-cartoon: it is not realistic in the literal sense, although the distortion may be apt, is apt – the whole point of the existence of the “cartoon” is the distortion, the not-real: this is where the meaning lies.

Similarly, the animated film is a cartoon, for it lacks absolute literal realism. It exists because of the editing involved, an editing which distorts real movement into an illusion of movement and linear continuity, in the case of classical realist cinema, where the montage cuts, the point at which the film becomes an animation, to Small and Levinson, are hidden as much as possible to preserve the illusion of continuous action. Editing provides a distortion, a “sutured over” space where there is an unfilled gap, and hence a place where the detail is not known. A cartoon must be defined in its relation to realism or realist drawing (we will see this clearly soon). Perfect mimesis attempts to capture a scene in all its detail – so much detail, no less, that it takes on the third dimension which is literally impossible on flat canvasses. This of course is impossible; representation is not identical with real life. Plato believed it was an inferior imitation of the world, which is itself an imitation of true nature as it exists in essential forms. So realism uses techniques to provide the effect of reality in its absence. One such technique is to amass sufficient detail, both physical and psychological, to produce the effect or illusion of the real, and hence of three dimensions (but without amassing *so much* detail that the illusion once again fails).

Cartoons have two dimensions. They are thus the failure of realism in this regard because they fail to make the final leap to the third dimension, instead remaining obviously flat and hence obviously representations. This too will be demonstrated when



we look at the way critics use the term “cartoon” in reviews. Cartoons are usually consigned to the low arts, partly because that is their place on the hierarchy of representational conviction. The real effect fails when caricatural satire is introduced, and when spaces are not filled with detail but rather are left unnaturally empty. Caricature leaves gaps in the same way: the selection of certain details to caricature and load with detail produces a gap in the features not selected for this treatment – these are empty in comparison. Also, the overdetermined part of the drawing suggests a gap between itself and its object, and makes no attempt to cover this gap. Both cartoons and animation generally, then, exist primarily in the gap, in the in-between. While one couldn’t say, without losing all useful meaning from the term, that all animations are cartoons, one can say that cartoons have similar characteristics to animations. The fact that animations also produce a gap between themselves and the object they are representing, one that isn’t covered over, suggests that the modern coinage of “cartoon” to cover animation is legitimate under certain circumstances.

This is another sense, though, in which animation *is* a cartoon, and that is the metaphorical sense that it is a preliminary version of cinema generally. Alan Cholodenko, in the introduction to *The Illusion of Life*, a book of essays theorising animation, describes animation’s treatment by the discourse of film theory:

In neglecting animation, film theorists – whether they have thought about it at all – have regarded animation as either the “step-child” of cinema or as not belonging to cinema at all, belonging rather to the graphic arts. In the former case film theory still sees animation as a form of film, albeit its most inferior form, as a child to live action’s adult form. In the latter case, it would no longer be possible to speak of animation as the most neglected form of film... (Cholodenko, 1991a, 9)

In this sense, animation becomes to “film” what the Renaissance preliminary is to the painting: as Cholodenko adds, “a claim can be made that animated film not only preceded the advent of cinema but engendered it; that the development of all those nineteenth century technologies – optical toys, studies in persistence of vision, the projector, the celluloid strip, etc. – *but for photography* was to result in their combination/synthesising in the animatic apparatus of Emile Reynaud’s Theatre Optique of 1892; that, inverting the

conventional wisdom, cinema might then be thought of as animation's "step-child" (10).

The "conventional wisdom" of this matter is quite similar to a logic that might have been developed in the pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Cartoons here are expressly "passed over" by the more powerful film studies; they are the "preterite" form of the film genre. They are illegitimate films, existing in two dimensions rather than the "real" three dimensions. Film thus establishes its identity by denying a part of itself that it nonetheless sees as "other", inferior, and by purifying itself of it, by neglect or by deportation into another discourse. And yet a William-Slothropian heresy applies: the "elected" discourse, without realising it, or wanting it to become common knowledge, depends upon the existence of the "preterite" discourse for its own status.

### Banal usages

One of the features of a cartoon is that in its representation is predominantly an outline, so that in it, important life-like details are missing. An example of this might be the portrayal of President Clinton on an episode of *The Simpsons* (Michels 1999). The cartoon version of Mr. Clinton eschews complex details of the President's looks and (in particular) demeanour in favour of a simple outline and a wash of colour, featuring enough recognisable personal attributes (in this case the President makes an inappropriate suggestion to Marge Simpson) for people to be able to tell who he is supposed to be. To cartoon someone thus involves the reduction of their representation to a less-than-realistic form, while retaining the "outline" of the representation.

The way this reduction functions in narratives can be seen in syndicated comic strips, which each day present their characters in selected situations to make a (usually comic) point, and which, over time, present the lives of their characters as consisting of long series of these peaks. Of course, nobody expects this to be otherwise: if non-peak time is ever suggested or presented it is only as a lead-in or in contrast to the more important business at hand which activates the characters. Moreover, a look at an animated cartoon like *The Simpsons* reveals a similar effect. On the micro-level, many of this programme's scenes are effectively comic strips in which characters find themselves in extra-ordinary situations for the sake of the thrust of the narrative or even simply to

prepare for a punch line. In one episode, Homer Simpson finds himself in a psychiatric institution with many of the characters from Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the characters' appearances being based on the actors who played the roles in Milos Forman's 1973 film adaptation. But unlike the film, in which the character the Chief steadfastly refuses to talk, in the cartoon he immediately breaks type and years of silence by responding to Homer's first greeting. "I was just waiting for someone to reach out to me", he says (Moore 1991).

It is the abrasion between our knowledge of the intertextual reference and its bathetic treatment in the events on-screen that produces the comic effect here. But this produces the cartoon effect also: the characters from the pre-text are wheeled on simply to fulfil a function – making a joke – and after the joke has been made they are discarded. It is as if they are but a functional component in a larger machine. Pynchon also gives this impression at a number of points in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In one example, Major Marvy and his sidekick Clayton "Bloody" Chiclitz discuss a crazy plan which involves having members of their illegal fur-trading operation go to Hollywood after the war. They hope the young men will star in Cecil B. DeMille's epic movies. To the objection by Marvy that DeMille would just cast the young men as extras, possibly galley slaves, Chiclitz roars, "Never, by God. For DeMille, young fur-henchmen can't be rowing!" (559). Steven Weisenburger comments: "The most elaborately staged pun in all of *G.R.* Camouflaged within it is the declaration 'Forty million Frenchmen can't be wrong'.... Note that Pynchon has fashioned an entire narrative digression about illicit trading in furs, oarsmen in boats, furhenchmen, and DeMille – all of it in order to launch this pun" (240). As with all cartoons the Simpson family, Marvy and Chiclitz are playthings on the page of the animator: their autonomy is limited by the vision of their creator and the power their creator has over their actions. The joke itself comes *from* the cartooning, from the editing of the characteristics of these characters, and the subsequent loss of the dimensionality of these characters due to editing and elision. It is a point at which comic attention is called to the construction of a fiction. In the case of more realistic narratives, the arbitrariness implicit in the actions of characters is hidden, "sutured", in Laclau and Mouffe's terminology (1985). Where an author lacks the skills to do this, critics will often tell them that their characters lack motivation, or that the narratives seem contrived.

This would make them “bad” narratives.

Meanwhile, at the level of the programme as a whole, *The Simpsons*, which structurally resembles a traditional American situation comedy, is also in effect a comic strip: every episode presents the lead up to and resolution of a crisis, an extraordinary moment. In this, virtually all situation comedies are like comic strips. Their characters tend to be comic functions rather than autonomous characters. By being cartoons, the Simpsons tend to call attention to this fact. Live-action comedies that also call attention to the artificiality of the environment (a good example is the metafictional 1980s comedy *The Garry Shandling Show*, which exists within the prison of a series of conventions it is aware of but ultimately powerless to escape – just as with *The Simpsons* it is a prisoner of its genre) “look” cartoonish because the characters have no realistic believability. The fact that these are characters played by actors, and not “real people” makes them seem cartoonishly flat, just as Marvy and Chiclitz are flattened by their absolute submission to the comic desires of author Pynchon. This shows once again that cartoons represent a lack. The cartoon becomes noticeable as a cartoon because people perceive that a “realistic” third dimension is missing from it.

This is something reviewers pick up on. In reviews of both novels and films, cartoons *lack*: engagement (“Peopled with cartoon characters, the book is intellectually interesting but not emotionally involving” [Pool 1987, 10]); individuality (“The main problem is with the characters who inhabit the novel – or rather, with the absentee tenants who sporadically show up in it, never able to escape the curse of generalisation in which they are imprisoned. For the most part, they are depicted as cartoon Germans... who can yield satire or just plain silliness” [Morley 1996, 41]); humanity, (“What’s remarkable about this book, however, is the very fact that she doesn’t turn her parents into two-dimensional stick-figures but instead makes them wonderfully palpable human beings, flawed, unreliable, even treacherous but also vulnerable and desperate to love.” [Kakutami 1995, 28]); immediacy (“Violent acts occur at a remove, cartoon-like...” [Somerville 1996, 48]); or complexity and “fullness” (“The movie starts viewing [Robert DeNiro’s title character] Gil not as a human being but a symbolic one-dimensional monster who has to be tracked down and shot.... But with no character left to play, [DeNiro’s] skilful mugging is to little avail. Diminished into the movie’s garish fantasy

of a celebrity stalker.... As 'The Fan' turns into a horror cartoon, it loses track of subsidiary characters who gave its early scenes such a harsh satiric bite.... The film's elegantly tricky cinematography and ominous, pounding score... only underline the emptiness behind its technical flash" [Holden 1996, 3]).

In general critical usage, when the term "cartoon" gets used metaphorically to compare something to a literal cartoon, the lack it constitutes is the lack of convincing life-like attributes. Hence I will take the liberty myself of using the term "cartoon" loosely, to describe this series of related phenomena. This is partly because this is how critics tend to use it in relation to various works of art, usually popular art, and partly because it is less the cartoon as an art form than "cartoon-ness" as a metaphor for representation in the postmodern era that seems the important trope here. In exploring the term's non-technical or non-historical, banal usage, we can perhaps discover some important attributes of the term. Thus I will conflate the cartoon as an art form with figures of representation which are "like a cartoon".

If a political cartoon involves simplifying and/or exaggerating the features of a recognisable figure, then a written text, or a film with real actors which does the same thing – indulges in simplifications or caricatures – can be regarded as cartoonish. In short, the cartoon is perceived as a simplification, often accompanied by an exaggeration. In the case of stereotypes, the exaggeration and simplification may exist as exaggerated simplicity of representation – an exaggerated simplification of complex differences that exist in the type-subject group. Usually also, "cartoons" are associated with children, childhood, or childishness, or with things, genres or artistic forms associated with children. The general (cartoon) rule of thumb is that the more simple, or the more exaggerated a representation is, the more likely it is to be described as a cartoon, whether the representation's technical aspects invite such a description or not.

This is from a review of the Sylvester Stallone vehicle, *Judge Dredd*.

[Sylvester Stallone] is as pumped-up as Rambo. And his heroic, letter-of-the-law character has all the power and stern authority of, say, Bugs or Mickey or Daffy. Based on the British cult comic books, "Judge Dredd" is evidence that there is such a thing as being too faithful to another genre.

Like a comic book, the film is busy and flat.... Unlike Bugs or Daffy, though, Dredd has neither a good sense of humour nor a glimmer of how to bring

cartoons to life.... The young director, Danny Cannon, obviously knows what he is up to. Mr Stallone, hit on the head early in the film, walks through the rest of it with an unrealistic-looking swath of blood plastered to one side of his face, just the way a comic book character would. At one point, Mr von Sydow puts his head in his hands to express sorrow, assuming a comic-book pose. But live actors in comic-book poses aren't very interesting. Mr Schneider's performance is likeable and scene-stealing, simply because he is the only one who seems human. (James 1995, 3)

As you can see, the reviewer here conflates comic books and animated films and suggests that cartoons are less interesting than "human"-seeming characters. The suggestion that the film is both "busy and flat" is another assertion of "cartoons'" lack of substance: the film, like comic books, has plenty of action, but very little significance or meaning can be attached to it. The film's violence thus occurs "at a remove, like a cartoon", which is a consequence of trying to inflate a flat form like a comic book into a supposedly three-dimensional form like a live-action film. Caryn James, the reviewer, interestingly suggests the possibility of cartoons coming, at some point, to life. But this can happen only if they remain cartoons, and so only if they keep in their place, and so exercise themselves in lively, amusing frivolities. Similar comments apply to Stephen Holden's review of *The Fan*, a section of which was quoted a few pages ago. Here the fault of the movie is, once again, that cartoons intrude into spaces they have no right to be. Once they have intruded, Robert DeNiro has "no character left to play", and so the film becomes "diminished", and there is an underlining of its "emptiness". The film also is seen as becoming less complex once it is contaminated by cartoon-ness, "losing track of subsidiary characters who gave its early scenes such a harsh satiric bite", and hence losing immediacy or life.

Amongst criticisms of high art which complain of cartoons or "cardboard cutouts", the tragedy seems to be that the character or world under discussion has somehow been emptied. They certainly lack fullness. A comment from a review Meg Worlitzer wrote for the *New York Times Book Review* is typical in this regard: in a good novel (like the one she is reviewing), "Most of the characters in the novel are well-drawn, and interact convincingly" (1987, 10). These characters are hence "realised", or made to seem real. The term "cardboard cutout", found in some reviews, its meaning seemingly interchangeable with "cartoon", also suggests two-dimensionality (or one-dimensionality

if the reviewer is trying to be particularly cruel.) What they mean is that such creatures exhibit length and breadth, but lack depth. Cartoons plainly lack, and this “lack” is perceived as being a bad thing: “Not so Hellman”, writes Terry Teachout in a review, “Her once-popular memoirs can no longer be taken seriously... while her plays hardly rise above the level of political cartoons – one can almost see the captions printed in big block letters across the chests of the characters. What life they have, ironically, derives from their shrewd use of the forms of bourgeois melodrama.” (Teachout 1996, 34). Here once again cartoons are assumed to be simplifications that only gain a semblance of life if they keep to a cartoon world and avoid intruding into the “real” one. If they admit to being a simplified form (“Bourgeois melodrama”, say) then they come alive a little.

But cartoons using realistic conventions give the impression of stupidity: “*Showgirls* sounds too dopey to play like anything but a live-action cartoon” (Maslin 1995, 1), reads one review<sup>1</sup>. Another example: “Anyone who has followed [basketball’s] meteoric rise over the last 15 years knows that to coach an NBA team is to be thrust into the middle of intense competition that can deteriorate to the level of cartoon.” (Araton 1996, 11). Once more, here in a report in the *New York Times* sports section, the intrusion of cartoons onto the territory of the real is read as deterioration. This can be extended to being understood as a kind of deterioration of health, or at least of that illusion of a life-force that characterises realism: “[*The Hudsucker Proxy* by Joel and Ethan Coen] was a send-up of corporate greed in which Paul Newman played the cigar-smoking heavy.... But despite Mr Newman’s marquee name, the film was a flop at the box office and generally got poor reviews. The main complaint: these aren’t flesh-and-blood characters, they’re cartoons” (McDonald 1996, 1). To be a cartoon here is clearly to lack, to lack “flesh and blood”, and hence an inside, muscle power, a heart, autonomy. What this reviewer demands is the corporeality that comes with being human, and not just a paper- or celluloid-representation of the outline of a human.

The *New Zealand Listener*’s film critic Jan Chilwell makes similar assumptions in her review of *Natural Born Killers*. Complaining that the film, nominally a hyperreal study in how the mediated image, to quote Jean Baudrillard, encourages “a kind of brute

---

<sup>1</sup> As this example might suggest to anyone who has actually *seen Showgirls*, I don’t want to suggest that the reviewers I’m citing are necessarily *wrong* about their subjects. It is the metaphors they choose to deploy

fascination unencumbered by aesthetic, moral, social or political judgement” (Baudrillard 1987, 1), Chilwell tells us that “...Oliver Stone has elected to sidestep pesky notions such as context, coherence, narrative and thematic development to ape what he claims to abhor...” (Chilwell 1994, 42). In the absence of the conventions that create the illusion of reality, the film becomes “derivative, devoid of emotional resonance, intellectually banal and morally questionable. It’s also visually and viscerally exhilarating – a gut-churning, breakneck chamber of horrors ride” (ibid). This ambivalence is produced by “us and them: their debased superficiality and distortions; our appetite for it... it comes on more like an outbreak of symptoms than a diagnosis” (ibid). Like Pynchon, Chilwell (and Stone) seem to sense that the postmodern spectacle produces cartoons. But for Chilwell, there is little ambivalence about cartoons – they are firmly on the side of the media-driven machine: characters are “too thinly drawn” (ibid), are outlines, cartoons. And “Tommy Lee Jones is wasted as a ‘toon-type, chequerboard-suited prison governor” (ibid). Cartoons here are bad, a waste, symptomatic of a disease, useless politically. They are not, in short, *real*, and as such cannot preserve the human and moral from the intrusion of the inhuman.

I have already mentioned how editing, or the presence of a lack, whether it be a lack of consequences of action or a sense of complex existence, contributes to a sense of cartoon-ness in discourses surrounding literature and film. The cutout is cartoonish because of its lack of complexity, or of depth of characterisation, and hence critics imply that a piece in which cartoon cutouts exist cannot adequately advance understanding of the world or the human condition. Cartoon characters are thus outlines of “real” people or realised characters: they lack a centre. Instead they may be black-on-white outlines, or shaded in with limited detail or colour (or both). Cartoons can even exhibit some complexity, just not *enough*. A bold outline seems to be important to a cartoon, to separate the character from its environment, and both it and the environment from the void of the page. It is as if a bold stroke is needed to differentiate the representation from nothing at all, so close is it to non-meaning and so outrageously does it flirt with invalid mimesis.

Hence, Don DeLillo’s *Ratner’s Star* (1976) is just “Alice in Wonderland set at the

---

regarding them that I am interested in.



Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies.... The book is in the end, as elegantly meaningless as a mathematical abstraction, though considerably more unnerving and far more entertaining" (Heller 1976, 86). The spectre of non-existence haunts the "cartoon". Its simple colours and shadings are indications and reductions where complex and "realised" imitations of life perhaps ought to be. Amanda Heller's invocation of Lewis Carroll's novel for children in this review sheds light on another assumption, that cartoons are identified with children. This occurs quite commonly, as can be seen with the metaphor Alan Cholodenko automatically grasps for in his discussion of animation's relationship to film studies: that of step-child/step-parent. This metaphor aptly conveys the sense of a hierarchical relationship, a sense Cholodenko wants to put across – cartoons are treated as if they are to be ignored, or at least barely tolerated. This conflation of cartoons with childishness is hardly new, either. Kunzle, in volume two of his history of early comic strips, notes that a sales-pitch for Gustave Dore's "Prophecies for the People of France", dating between 1848 and the 1860s, tells us that comics are "for children of all ages". Kunzle comments that this "points to a new audience of intersecting generations and social classes: the older (ten to sixteen years of age), educated child and the child-in-the-adult. To these we must add the lower social classes, struggling, like children, into maturity. The burgeoning of the market for children's literature is a function of the expansion of a literate industrial popular culture. The "people", like the children they were supposed to resemble, wanted to look and laugh, to be entertained.... For [children's] literature, [there came] various styles of child-like drawing" (Kunzle 1990, 2).

It is this conflation of the child-in-the-adult and the child-in-the-lower-class that is most interesting here, particularly in light of some of the banal usages of "cartoon" we have been encountering. "Maturity" is read here as the antithesis of the cartoon; it corresponds to adult reality. But it also corresponds to the dominant classes in a stratified "mature" society. The "cartoon", then, corresponds to immaturity and to lower classes and the "preterite"; to non-completion of social grace or of transformation into maturity: it is a liminal space. However, this has implications for the non-cartoon ruling classes. Jerry Herron's essay on cartoons and Fredric Jameson's concept of postmodern nostalgia see the cartoon as culture's inner-child, usually hidden or disregarded, but capable of

emerging and colonising the adult form (Herron, 1993). Children can be seen as rough sketches of personality which require a touch-up into adulthood through parenting and good social authorship. If an adult becomes a child, he or she is seen as regressing, as lacking essential attributes of adulthood. Children are simpler, have fewer cares, play more, and so forth. But for Herron, who connects the notion of an inner child with the Jamesonian problem of a nostalgia for the present (see Jameson c1991, 279-296) in a world when history has disappeared so that the present cannot be anchored, it is not so much a matter of adults acting in a childish manner as the child actually colonising its parent culture. The rough sketch, then, colonises the painting and takes it over as it were. The low art form not only becomes high art, but high art is made low. Hence, the montage techniques of classic realist live-action cinema can make it seem instead animated (Small & Levinson, 69-70). Animation is a cartoon in this regard: in comparison to live action film it is a failure, because of its lack of a "reality effect". It is obviously-constructed and obviously-artefact, and hence is still growing, still developing maturity, a maturity that is the equivalent to realism. Its cartoon nature lies in the gap between itself and live-action, just as the Renaissance cartoon's lies in the gap between itself and the full-grown painting, and the modern cartoon's between itself and the full-grown reality effect. However, it is capable of moving into the centre of discourse about its parent/opposite, which is why those discourses often exclude this unruly element.

## Chapter seven

### Cartoons and Postmodern Discourses

A cartoon, from the common denominator of the definitions we outlined last chapter, is a drawing, or a particular type of drawing. By drawing, I'm speaking metaphorically as well as literally. One definition suggests that a cartoon is often deployed for comic effect. It refers to topical or political newspaper cartoons, and defines them as humorous. In this case the suggested effect might be satiric, in fact, as it can be used for topical comment. This suggests that cartoons are not automatically devoid of political or moral reference points. Just because a politician, for instance, is represented as something else, (a potato, to dig up a random example), is not to say the reader is incapable of referring the image back to what they take to be a real person, the politician. The problem with this, though, is that knowledge of the politician as a potato is derived from a stereotype, often perpetuated through media treatment of him or her. So it in fact refers more back to an already-existing simplified representation of a real person. Another definition, referring to a cartoon strip like *Garfield* or *Peanuts*, also suggests affinities between cartoons and non-drawing-type behavior. Speech is often attached, so there is a textual dimension to this type of cartoon. It is also capable of narrativity because it tells a story. The third definition suggests even more life-like attributes: a kinetic element is introduced through animation, and recording techniques can add sound, making the cartoon a potential simulation for human activity and behaviour. And the fourth suggests the incompleteness of this representation: the cartoon is a preliminary sketch of something that may or may not eventually pretend to imitate life or reality. To use this fourth definition as a metaphor momentarily, then, Chilwell's complaint about *Natural Born Killers* suggests that perhaps the "thinly drawn" characters will become moral agents once "paint" is applied to them and the outline is filled in sufficiently. At some point, it is assumed, a representation becomes in some way human enough to allow readers to identify with it. At this point it stops being a cartoon in a bad way and starts being one in a good way, a way legitimated by the critic.

The assumption is that because of its lack of realism, a cartoon is somehow of less value than "[the murderer] with enough inner life that we can apprehend him", or a

deeply, humanly-played Tommy Lee Jones character. Bad cartoons are thus completely textual, and are therefore not real: they are things which are so obviously fictional they carry only limited “truth” value or moral agency, but instead represent functions. As Alan Cholodenko points out, cartoons are “*graphics*”; and cartoon cinema is “*cinematographic*” (1991b, 214). His point is that both cartoons and cinema, and cinema cartoons, are forms of writing, by which he means they inscribe meaning. Hence, the fact that cartoons are textual reinforces the textuality implied by the dictionary’s definition of “cartoon”: figures capable of actual recorded speech, or which have captions or speech bubbles implying speech, or which have a narrative. Language always already informs the cartoon, making its status as a metaphor for underdeveloped characterization at once apt and enlightening.

Obviously, because the cartoon is used as a metaphor, it is a text anyway: this is its third connection with language. As the metaphor we’ve been developing implies, it is often used to refer to underdeveloped characterization, characterization that is somehow less realistic than it ought to be. Here the fourth definition of “cartoon” – the cartoon as a preliminary sketch for a painting – can help. When a drawing becomes a painting (becomes more finished) it becomes more and more elaborate as colour, texture, perhaps perspective are added in later drafts. If our painting is a traditional realistic portrait, as these attributes are added it becomes a representation of an actual person. With the requisite skill level, the portrait painter makes the representation believable and lifelike. This seems opposed to its cartoon’s lack of conviction, or obviousness of its constructed nature. The “photographic realism” of some post-Renaissance paintings testifies to this. Alternatively, impressionism and symbolism contribute to a sense of psychological reality, an obsession with uncovering complex hidden truths about the artist or the art object. Similarly, continuing with our metaphor, as a cartoon character adds dimensions – more characteristics; as it starts to act and behave like a “real” person – then critics are more inclined to treat the figure as a real person, and the character becomes “realized”, an entity capable of moral agency. Is cartoon-ness then simply a matter of degree, the degree to which “colour” and “texture” are added to the sketch? If so, where does being a cartoon stop and being “real” begin? If a cartoon is an obviously fictional entity, an entity that fails to convince the viewer/reader that it stands in for something real, then a

border must define where the fictional stops and reality begins. Moreover, the art of realistic fictions must be in part a rhetorical art, the writer skillfully persuading readers or viewers that what they are reading or watching bears a privileged relationship with reality and everyday life.

### Turning cartoon

Certainly this is Roland Barthes' view. In *S/Z*, he identifies five major rhetorical "lexias" of realist writing, to be found in Balzac's short story "Sarrasan", often regarded as a piece of canonical realism. They are the Hermeneutic code, which refers to the interpretation of the passage; the Seme code, which covers the web of connotations that metaphors, similes and allusions could suggest to readers; the symbolic code, structures of symbols arranged oppositionally (sea/shore, for instance); the code of action, which is plot, the logic of the events in the story; and the code of reference, which is how the story refers to or played upon cultural codes, common knowledges, and common senses that a story might contain (Barthes, 1974, 9-20). Character, for Barthes, here consists of the repetition of seme codes, using similar metaphors and allusions to compare the character in the narrative to outside sources, and to trust the reader's knowledge of symbol to set the correct impression of character. "Life, in the classic text" is, for Barthes, a "nauseating mixture of common opinions, a smothering layer of received ideas" (206). A single system of naturalistic reading, reading for true character, renders also the reader "plasticised by a singular system" (4-5). Characters can be said to be "cartoon-like" too, drawn up by a series of conventions. The realistic character is realistic only insofar as readers accept the conventions by which their realism is expected to be measured, conventions which Barthes would identify as constructed culturally.

Postmodernist historiographic metafiction tend to problematise and demystify attempts to present naturalistic or totalised accounts of historical events, suggesting that historical discourse is concerned not with finding the truth of historical events, but rather the narrativisation of history itself. In other words, historical discourse forces the past to conform to narrative forms which have a beginning, a middle and an end, whereas the events themselves can be regarded as formless or plotless until cultural narrative

structures, which allow historians to interpret them, are imposed. Linda Hutcheon suggests that negative reactions to such metafictional demystification may come from inheritors of the “long tradition from Hegel to Marx through Lucacs to Eagleton that tends to see only the past as the site of positive values... always in direct contrast to the capitalist present” (1988, 212). Seeing postmodernism in general, and historiographic metafiction in particular, as a discourse that paradoxically represents history and simultaneously challenges the possibility of that representation, she points out that novels like E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* and Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* make it clear that one

never could [“set out to represent the historical past”, as Fredric Jameson complained the historical novel no longer does] – except by means of seemingly transparent conventions. To [Jameson’s] lament that all fiction today can do is “‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about the past” (71), these novels reply that this is all they have ever been able to do, and that this is the lesson of the entire crisis in contemporary historiography. The postmodern problematising of historical knowledge prevents statements such as: “The past, simpler than the present, offers a kind of model from which we can begin to learn the realities of history itself” (Jameson 1973, xiv). This, if anything, is nostalgia. The past was never “simpler”; it has only been simplified. (212)

Jameson’s tendency toward totalisation, in his attempt to find explanatory metanarratives and his lament that such explanations have become impossible because of the fragmentary nature of an advanced capitalist world, leads to history’s “cartooning” through metonymic generalization. The idealizations of the “simpler” and more idyllic pasts that are a part of both the Marxist and conservative traditions reduces the dimensionality of the actual events which took place, which we can presume were as complex and contradictory as events today. And, I will suggest, it is nostalgia of the type that Jameson exhibits that makes this form of cartooning dangerous.

Here “history”, in the traditional sense of seeking a “closed” truth about an event, can be compared to “realism”. Jameson accuses postmodern histories of not grappling with the real issues of the past. Hutcheon defends the postmodernists, suggesting that history, and “realistic” historical fiction, never did more than tell a narrative according to narrative convention, attempting to fit the past into a structure, in other words, when it

was essentially unstructured. The result was and is that structure itself became the truth, according to postmodernists: the conventions of historical writing were preserved, rather than the “what really happened” of the events themselves. It was not a story of these events that the history told, it was a story of a privileged interpretation of those events, from a particular position that was universalized as truth – the events no longer existed outside of a representation of them.

So, to Hutcheon, postmodern metafictional histories were, among other things, simply being honest about the limits of their knowledge. One of the methods of presenting these limits is to make characters and events seem cartoonish, by introducing, when presenting “real” events, “comic repetitions, manic zaniness, and apocalypticism... metafiction, pop surrealism and undergirding paranoia” (Irwin), much as Pynchon does in his historiographic metafictions *V.* (1963), *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon* (1997). Often, although not always or necessarily, self-reflexive characterization comes to seem, and is accused of being, cartoonish. If this is the case, then a good deal of self-reflexive postmodernism should also have a cartoonish feel to it. In novels like Don DeLillo’s *Ratner’s Star* and *End Zone* (1972), realistic representation is regarded by the author as secondary to his exploration of how subjectivities are produced in culture and language. This postmodernist concern displays a lack of respect for realistic convention, giving both books the feel of a cartoon rather than of pieces of realism.

Exposing the conventions of writing in this way, and reflexively suggesting that there is nothing “real” beyond them, distances the world of writing from “reality”, and hence challenges the possibility of “realism”. Metafiction in general suggests that realism reduces the “real” by closing it off from other possibilities – realism can, for instance, privilege the “bourgeois” reality Barthes identifies in Balzac’s realism, at the expense of other methods of perception, knowledge and representation. In this sense, because realism is a reduction from “the real”, a realistic narrative is always already a “cartoon”. And, oddly, the more “real” the representation becomes, or attempts to be, the more difficult it is to sustain its illusion of “reality”. As realism enacts closure, its conventions and artifices become a problem for it: as Mark Seltzer comments, in reference to nineteenth century realism and naturalism,

[t]he perfection of realism would be a perfect referentiality: *bodies and matter writing themselves*. But if the perfection of realism would be its perfect referentiality, the identification of technologies of writing and “the subject” of writing as two versions of the same thing would render the realist project purely tautological. The perfect referentiality of realist writing would thus be its perfect self-referentiality: the realist project of accounting for persons as effects or products of the machine, as typical and predictable functions of a social biomechanics, would be identical to accounting for persons and personation as effects of writing. (Seltzer, 1992, 108-9)

J.P. Stern too places the limits of realism at the point where its artifice becomes obvious: “Realism allows for symbolical meanings, but it limits their range. Symbolist literature moves beyond that range, to the point where a break occurs between ‘is’ and ‘stands for’, where shared knowledge gives way to intimation; symbolism begins where intimation ceases to be subordinated to a realistic purpose and becomes dominant, an open-ended vision” (1973, 84). This “shared knowledge” Stern appeals to is the non-polemical version of Barthes’ “common opinions... received ideas” (1974, 206). The cartoon, if it is to be seen in our context as the effect of this writing revealing itself, is only different from the realistic character in that the cartoon is obviously a symbol, whereas the realistic character is a symbol, a far more complex symbol, to be sure, masquerading as a mirror image. Or to put it in Seltzer’s terminology, the cartoon is writing when its mechanical component is noticed, like the circuitry on Bongo-Shaftsbury’s hand in *V*. (80), while the realistic character is, like the Terminator in James Cameron’s film (1984, invoked by Seltzer in his previous sentence), writing whose organic basis is there to cover over its mechanical componentry. Cartoons, then, are a form of realism, and exist according to the degree of closure the realism enacts. Cartoonness is a matter of *degree*. Its point of inception depends upon the reader’s conviction, or the perception of the completeness of closure. Cartoon-ness does not depend (although it can) on the *success* of closure, because this assumes firstly that the writer always wants to close the narrative from alternative, non-realistic interpretations, and secondly that the writer *can*, even if he or she tries.

The last passages of *Gravity’s Rainbow* enact a peculiar connection between worlds, between the world of the book and the final separation from it, the world outside the book. Hence it is “us” that sit in the theatre: the novel opens radically outward to



include all of reality. The politics of the novel are hence the politics of an extra-literary reality in which the rocket and everything it symbolizes, whether it be (totalitarian) “fascist” systems, structures favouring death, the enlightenment project, apocalypse achieved through the acceleration of technologies of domination, the aestheticisation of politics, or any of its other significations, are deliberately extended to present (1973) reality. Since, following Benjamin, the nature of (totalitarian) “fascist” reality is an aestheticised reality in which the “ism” of realism and the “ity” of reality are forced into the same space, “real” people can, under certain circumstances, be read as representations. The mirror, which becomes the nexus of narcissistic and hence, at its extreme, totalitarian identity, acts as a screen upon which an aestheticised and perceived *image is taken to be* reality. In the wake of poststructuralist theories about the impossibility of a “reality” unmediated by culture (that is, reality exists, but there is no access to it without language and symbolization, which puts reality at one remove from what it is possible to *totally* know) the experienced, extra-novelistic world *can be regarded as* a “realism”. This comes complete with a “reality effect” in which subjects misrecognise an *ideological* construct of reality as the “unchangeable” or “real” reality. Benjamin’s reply to fascism, to “politicise art” seems fulfilled by Pynchon and Ellis. I will show in chapter eleven that with these novelists, politicising art involves undermining “reality’s” “reality effect” (Barthes 1982) by their art’s intrusion into the “real” world. (Totalitarian) “fascism”, from this standpoint, is the author of an extreme form of realist writing; my argument is that Pynchon and Ellis show that its failure lies in the exposure of a “cartoon” element already within these extremities of realist form.

Critical reviews, time and again, assume that cartoons represent the failure of realistic aspirations in a work of art. This manifests itself in two ways – the genuine cartoon is regarded as trivial because it seems irrelevant to realist representation, and is often excluded from discussions as a result; the presence of cartoons in otherwise realist forms is regarded as a failure of the perfection or realization of the form. It will be my contention, however, that (totalitarian) “fascist” conditions render the world cartoonish; cartoons, under such conditions, could be considered a realistic mode of representation. This argument is less a critique of realism, based on what realism has been over the years, than a critique of unthought critical assumptions about the nature of *representation*: as

J.P. Stern, one of the strongest traditional defenders of realism notes, realism stands at a “complex relation to [reality]... it too exaggerates and omits, that is, distorts” (56). Many writers of realism would, I’m sure, agree – to demand of realism that it “reflects” reality with the precision of an actual mirror is to demand too much of it. Its approximate nature, or its selective nature (provided its practitioners are not deluded into thinking it nonetheless, or thereby, captures “reality”) prevents realism from attaining (totalitarian) “fascist” closure and actually *masquerading as if it is* reality. Nonetheless, the failure to attain a plausible realism seems to be grounds for aesthetic dismissal, to some critics.

Robert Newsom sees this anxiety as a part of a moral problem: for “[most of the history of literary criticism], the worry about fiction... has been a moral rather than a logical (or psychological) one: What is the moral effect upon us of our being entertained by representations of things that never happened?” (Newsom 1988, 108). The development of the category of the aesthetic allays this problem, so that only people outside the literary world itself still see it *as* a problem, and in the nineteenth century, “with the ascendancy at the same time of realism, that worry also begins to recede, for because realism seeks an accurate representation of the world as it really is, it is of the nature of realism that it veils the fictionality of fictions: fictions whose fictionality is plain are bad fictions. Thus critics skeptical of the merely aesthetic and very much concerned with the moral effects of literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – critics like Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis, for example – never worry about fictions as fictions, but only worry about whether particular fictions see things as they actually are” (108-9). Most critical concerns with cartoons occur in this sort of moral way: when cartoons remain in the appropriate place, they can be safely ignored by the realist critic; when, however, a form of representation that makes its fictionality plain transgresses into a form the critic believes ought to keep its fictionality veiled (so that it can “represent the world as it really is”) there can be indignation. A cartoon’s occurrence in a traditionally realist form, such as a novel or a film, usually troubles critics that have realist assumptions.

Such assumptions are built around the realist commonplace that it is possible to “hold a mirror up to nature”, to represent a possible world in a way that corresponds to the reader’s or viewer’s experiences of the world. This mimetic project is indeed possible

to the extent that writers throughout the history of realism have been convincing readers of the trueness to life of their fictions. They write fictions that nonetheless contain a sense of the extra-fictional. One of the most obvious justifications of life-like writing is that the events described and the characters portrayed could easily have lived next door, and thus their fictional experiences are able to be learned from. Fiction, despite not having actually happened (few works of fiction ever try to actually fool the reader into believing that depicted events “really” happened, only that they might be able to), can nonetheless provide the reader with an enriched understanding of the reality we all inhabit.

### Postmodernism as “cartoon”

Postmodern and metafictional novels often eschew cause and effect, and often seem cartoonish as a result. Postmodern fiction is often characterized in the following terms: it is self-referring, or metafictional, because its underlying premise is that representation is a function of language rather than reality. It takes upon itself to “demystify” representation, denying the possibility of discovering “universal truths”, because “truth” is a function of language and culture. Hence it refers instead, in theory endlessly, to itself, to the way the fiction itself produces meaning. Along with this it engages in the more radical premise that reality itself is a construction, a function of power and desire realized through power over interpretation (and hence language). Pynchon certainly exhibits this premise with his paranoid readings of “reality” as being an ideological construct of “the Firm”, a system of meanings designed to conserve and increase the power of its elites.

One of the major characteristics of postmodernism as it is usually defined is its privilege of surface. As Terry Eagleton wrote, “postmodernism, confidently post-metaphysical, has outlived all the fantasy of interiority, that pathological itch to scratch surfaces for concealed depths...” (1988, 394). Baudrillard also mentions how everything exists now at a surface level, obvious, like pornography (1983, 130-1). Baudrillard’s description of postmodernity is of a totalitarian society, not engineered around the charisma of a leader/parent like previous examples, but around a monologic of surface,

simulacrum (a copy for which no original exists) and commodity. This may at first seem to be a universe which transcends binary logic, instead promoting a singular logic in which everything has equal presence (as Terry Eagleton says, “value is just that which *is*” [393]). However, this is just a measure of the success of the total environment Baudrillard describes<sup>1</sup>.

Like all total environments, this is a world in which the positive point of the binary construct has covered over and annihilated its “other”. Here relationships with the other become detached and reattached to another binary relationship, one with absence, and particularly the absent real, or referent. The image here precedes reality. It has come to colonize and take over reality by simulation. Therefore “the body”, for instance, has come to seem “simply superfluous” (1983, 129). This shows the lesser dimensionality of the economy of the sign: “All functions are abolished in a single dimension: that of communication” (131). This communication is cartoon-like and like (totalitarian) “fascism” as we conceive it here – the ideology Baudrillard describes practices “the forced extroversion of all interiority” (132). The surface is where communicable information resides, completing the job of the spectacle’s colonizing project, for there is now no private space away from the gaze of others. This is like a cartoon in three ways: people become points of information, all of which reside on the surface – they become readable outlines; the body is rejected in favour of a less complex version of the self; there is a gap between the image of a person’s self and an effect of their “real” self (reality is hidden away to the point where suspicion rages that it never existed.)

From what we have been saying, (totalitarian) “fascism” can be read as the colonization of the real by cartoons. In writing about America, in his book of the same name, Baudrillard (1988) describes life in America as being like a desert, lived as if on a cinema screen. America here stands, in Douglas Kellner’s view, for “the liquidation of a multi-dimensional and critical (European) culture, the desertification or one-

---

<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard often cases his arguments in alarmist, apocalyptic terms, making assertions rather than arguments – his figuration of a simulated crime in “The Precession of Simulacra” is unconvincing for this reason [1984, 266-7]. But, because the Baudrillardian critique contains some important descriptions of postmodern tendencies, despite the science fiction aspects of his theory, even now we can leave aside the extent to which Baudrillard’s conception of an economy of signs corresponds with lived reality for most people and just note that it may be an instance of theory slipping into cartoon.

dimensionalization of the social in the wasteland of the indifferent" (1989, 170). Postmodern America is thus a place without multiple dimensions. This must be the case in the spectacle, where the social becomes a matter for contemplation, and where, hence, all meaning resides on the surface.

Fredric Jameson shows how in postmodernity the dimension of history becomes lost to individuals, who thus become like schizophrenics, and react to stimuli almost as if they are encountering them for the first time (1983, 119-20). This flattens them, as categories such as depth and individuality tend to be produced by differences in individual and cultural histories and the intersections of these. Jameson regards this as the highest form of capitalism so far, which creates and mobilizes its subjects as consumers, consuming disposable items. His schema for schizophrenia derives from Lacan, and it once again involves the failure of the subject to reach the Oedipal phase, in Lacan's case a phase of language-mastery posited in the phallic name-of-the-father. This makes schizophrenia an "inability of the infant to accede fully into the realm of speech and language" (118). Hence we have at this point too an example of the child colonizing the parent culture, as Jameson sees postmodernity as a period of generalized schizophrenia. The loss of history this involves also brings on a society of amnesia, and makes pastiche – an arbitrary amalgam of previous styles – the most prevalent artistic technique or genre.

Hence, modern, or postmodern conditions, ones depicted by Ellis and Pynchon as being (totalitarian) "fascist", resemble cartoons as well. As with more traditional fascists, the people living in these conditions are also cartoonish outlines. Certainly, postmodern "reality", as it is presented in the writings of Baudrillard, Jameson, Pynchon and Ellis, is a very odd sort of "reality". Mediated by technology and representation, it is very much an aestheticised reality. However, it still presents itself as "real", as the true conditions of living in an advanced society, the "highest" stage of "advanced" capitalism so far. It still involves the suppression of a component in a binary structure, the suppression of a sense of corporeal reality for an image-as-ideal, and a sense that, in the words of Rey Chow, "we are not other" (1995, 45).

Postmodern fiction often also denies coherence, refusing to tie plot-strands together into a coherent whole, instead often willfully fragmenting the narrative and

characters. The assumption behind this is that by refusing to tie meaning together, the narratives both reflect (paradoxically) the way things actually are – chaotic, non-coherent – and equalize meaning, so that one conclusion is not given priority over others. For instance, as with *Gravity's Rainbow*, *American Psycho* displays many of Irwin's categories of "comic repetitions, manic zaniness, and apocalypticism... metafiction, pop surrealism and undergirding paranoia" (56), making this novel similar too to the Porky Pig and the anarchist cartoon "The Blow Out". Indeed, the novel's self-referentiality adds to the impression of cartoon-ness, and, as with other examples of postmodern metafiction, is accompanied by a retreat from realistic characterization.

*American Psycho*'s postmodernism produces effects that strike at the heart of questions over reactionary co-option of postmodernist categories, and therefore the political potentials of postmodernism itself. The postmodern techniques Ellis uses cartoon the novel by reducing the realism of its descriptions of the world and its characters. Bateman functions as a demonstration of how postmodernism can be the cultural expression of late capitalism, and therefore how "realism" and "maturity" might be of some political benefit. The question that will need to be answered is about whose reality this realism would reflect. Bateman also demonstrates that a totally imposed environment also turns the imposed reality into a cartoon – that it both holds together and falls apart at the same time. And at the same time, the novel makes cartoons of its readers by imposing the total environment Bateman represents on us as well.

For Laura Tanner, in *American Psycho* Ellis has created a protagonist who behaves much like Marx's version of the capitalist class: "Ellis attempts to unveil the machinery that creates the magical illusions of a psycho-capitalist world in which the wealthy and beautiful have the power to transform anything into anything" (Tanner, 98). Bateman's behaviour is a result of the alienation of the capitalist from the physical acts of labour, so that he conceives of bodies not as subjectivities, as people, but as being manipulable, mutable, transformable into other things (commodities, for instance), and "incapable of pain" (98). This alienation is embedded in the narrative of the novel, which Tanner sees as being ruled by Bateman to the point where even his victims' cries of pain actually deny them subjectivity, instead empowering Bateman, because their pain and

suffering is rendered in his own imaginative terms. Representation in the novel means being subjected to the depersonalising processes a total environment offers.

Moreover, Tanner offers an explanation as to why this book in particular drew the ire of pro-censorship groups: Bateman apparently also offers the reader no escape from his psychoses. "The reader finds him- or herself forced to negotiate a text that asserts narrative omnipotence and seems to deny the reader even the power of resistance", which is why calls for the book's banning – why resistance was based on extra-textual issues, as Elizabeth Young complains (86-87). The text of *American Psycho* forces the reader into "the status of passive observer" (Tanner, 112), and hence into a presumably unwanted complicity with the acts Bateman commits, so that exploitation never stops and resistance to the totality of capitalism and spectacle is impossible. Tanner's call for "oppositional reading... to the very terms of readership implicit in the text" (114), or to the relations between the reader and the text, sounds a little like revolutionary consciousness in this context.

This is because the novel constructs its readers as victims. We are, as Tanner suggests, like one of his victims, forced into watching Bateman's deeds while in a situation she cannot escape. As such, each of its readers has the potential for revolutionary consciousness – one no longer has to belong to the essential revolutionary classes. Even the system's policemen – its privileged – can become its victims, as the death of Paul Owen testifies. Guy Debord predicted this situation when he commented that the ultimate triumph of spectacle means "the proletarianization of the world" (#26), an absolute totalitarian social context similar to the one readers are presented with here.

Upon first encountering the narrative, Bateman's voice is difficult to read past. Tanner is right: the book seems all Bateman; he obliterates everything else in here. The narrator shouts, dominating by sheer force of personality, and by the compounding layers of detail, with which he continually confounds the reader. But his narration is also profoundly unreliable, and Elizabeth Young sees this fact as opening the book up to resistance to its violence, to a deconstruction of Bateman's voice which defuses his violence, rendering it a representation of nothing, and thus giving readers a chance to reclaim their subjectivity from him. Her argument, though, only helps readers go so far: a very pessimistic account of life under the sign of the postmodern spectacle remains, and

this opens the book and Young's reading up to objections about the paralysis of action implicit in postmodernisms such as Ellis's.

Young expresses surprise at how few critics of the novel realize that its narration is radically untrustworthy. She suspects that writers bring non-literary agendas to their criticism, agendas that blind reviewers to the elementary critical errors they make as a result. For instance, some writers try to equate Bateman with his author, and read *American Psycho* as a manifesto, or a work of "snobbery" (Tucker 1991), or as an object for people to possess so that they can increase their standing within a social clique (Young, 88). Unargued conflation of the author with his or her first-person narrator is, of course, an elementary error for high school students, let alone professional literary commentators. Needless to say that very few people actually read the book well. Mim Udovitch's *Village Voice* review, which is largely negative, at least manages to "finally... gasp out: 'SLOW. UNRELIABLE NARRATOR WORKING.'" This was actually an achievement considering how few other critics had even managed to reach this simple decision" (Young, 107-108).

This confusion in critics' minds may have something to do with the power of Bateman's voice. Upon first reading it is hard to find a way of peeling back his narration, because everything is filtered through his consciousness; it is his way of claiming ownership of his world. However, as Young points out, Bateman very quickly undermines his own credibility, even as he shouts to establish it. One aspect of the disintegration of Bateman's fantasy space that Young focuses on is his references to *The Patti Winters Show*, a day-time talk show that Bateman and many of his colleagues watch avidly. From the beginning the topics of this show are bizarre but plausible: Juggling Nazis, Autism, "descendants of members of the Donner Party" (*American Psycho*, 107). However, as the narrative proceeds, the subjects get more and more bizarre (a talking octopus, a boy in love with a box of soap) – even for daytime TV – and by the end, some of them are clearly misleading: they interview Bigfoot; they interview a "cherio", a piece of breakfast cereal, for an entire hour! This needn't surprise anyone: Bateman is a madman, and by this stage in his narrative he's having conversations with his ATM, and being spooked because park benches have been following him through the city. And this



in itself does not necessarily displace the scenes of torture/murder into fantasy-space, for he occasionally seems to run into the consequences of these while apparently sane.

But Young's argument is more sophisticated than this. The unreliability of Bateman as a narrator is presented as being related to the book's status as an object, a text. From the first chapter, where the first words of the novel, "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE" (3), are presented as being textual, "scrawled in blood red lettering" (ibid), to the last, which is a portentous sign ("THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" [399]) the text is presented as being at least partially a construct. Even the title of chapter one suggests this: "April Fools" might refer to the people in the chapter or to readers who take its contents at face value. Bateman changes scene by introducing film imagery: "Like in a movie" (3); "panning down to the sidewalk" (5); "[a] slow dissolve" (8); "[s]mash cut and I'm back in the kitchen" (11). Characters from other books walk through the narrative (including Bateman himself, who first appeared in *The Rules of Attraction*, Ellis's second novel, which had as a main character his brother Sean, who makes a cameo here), and Bateman works at the investment firm which centred Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Right at the end of *American Psycho*, Bateman overhears someone saying, "But look what happened to Gekko" (387), the Michael Douglas character from Oliver Stone's movie *Wall Street*. All of this suggests a world with no border between reality and fiction.

Farther along the road of self-referentiality is the case of Bateman's friend Tim Price, "the only interesting person I know" (22). His name itself suggests value (his colleagues frequently tell him he's "priceless"), which refers back to the obsessions of the novel. Price, however, also quite self-consciously disappears from the text, into the text by walking into a "tunnel" in one of the nightclubs. The only distinctive person in the text has been erased from it for the moment (he returns later "for the sake of form, or I'm pretty sure he does" [384]), leaving only identical personalities for Bateman to socialize with. The stockbrokers are also identical in their status as texts as well. For instance, Bateman lunches with a man who talks of his holiday in brochure-speak: "Travelers looking for that perfect vacation this summer may do well to look south, as far south as the Bahamas and the Caribbean Islands. There are at least five smart reasons for visiting the Caribbean..." (137). Like Bateman, most of the other characters define their lives by

the dictates of *GQ* or *Stereo World*, restaurant guides, etiquette guides, and other, textual, behavioural authorities.

For Young, Bateman is a cipher, a site where the implicit violence of the culture he exists in is given expression. Bateman can only exist within the novel's bounds. His power comes from his sources, from true crime accounts of serial killers to *Elegance: a Guide to Quality in Menswear* (the name of whose author is mistaken for that of a serial killer by another character) and other similar fashion rule-books. He is the product of an insane demand that people choose between consumer items ("*There are too many fucking videos to choose from!*" [112] Bateman shouts in exasperation at one point), of the insanity of people being continually confronted with a rush of banalities. Young argues that the fact that Bateman's fantasy murders and tortures appear "onstage", presented with all the pornographic detail that he describes everything else he does, makes readers confront their own relationship to fictionality itself. Bateman, to Young, "in his role of ultimate consumer, someone who is composed entirely of inauthentic commodity-related desires cannot exist as a person. He is doomed to fragmentation and disintegration" (121). Ellis, Young suggests, is conservative, puritanical even. He seems to exhibit nostalgia for an authentic "personhood" which has since been corrupted by advancing capitalism, and which does not exhibit the kind of fetishistic violence Bateman displays (120).

Young suggests that there are at least three separate Batemans in the narrative. Most notoriously, there is the one who breaks down and takes pleasure in killing. This Bateman feels undefined as a person, almost as if he is not there, a void that is filled with horror. There is also a Bateman who dates his secretary Jean, and who desires a better life, a life where connections between people can be made: he desires the maturity Young says is "other" to the book's world (94, 112). And there is yet another one: the Bateman who composes the three odd little sections each dealing with a 1980s pop music figure. This narrator seems similar to the second one in that his preoccupation is with growth and maturity, in this case over the length of a career. But that Bateman still finds it difficult to hold his thoughts and his personality together – he is the one who muses about the problems of existence. This Bateman is too coherent to be him: "Bateman [is]... not known for organized thinking" (112).

Another possibility Young explores is that, as there is so much confusion over who is actually who in Bateman's "yuppie" subculture, the narrative voice could contain whoever is being mistaken for him at the time. For instance, near the start of the book, "Bateman" complains that McDermott and Van Patten are being racist and anti-Semitic. Later he loudly calls a Jewish restaurant worker a "cocksucking kike" (*American Psycho*, 152). It is not until after Price disappears from the narrative that people start being killed "on stage", prompting the suggestion from Young that perhaps it is Price acting as Bateman, in a similar way to how "Bateman" takes the part of Marcus Halberstam to cover for killing Paul Owen, who is committing the serial murders (Young, 118). "Bateman" here is an empty signifier ("*I simply am not there*" [*American Psycho*, 377]), filled by the body in possession of that identity. Hence his confessions are never listened to or taken seriously, or, as with the phone message Bateman left with Harold Carnes, they are attributed to someone else. Bateman rather represents the general psychotic tendency of his ideology.

Bateman's crimes are thus undecidable, impossible, much like the fact that he can be both serial killer and mass murderer. (The police were closing in on him for his killing spree at the time he left his confession, but, like Bateman's identity, he proved elusive and remains uncaught. But perhaps that "Bateman" *was* caught, and we are now in another's head....) *American Psycho* deconstructs so that the violence within its pages is a set of textual devices. This remains true of Young's argument whether or not Ellis's critique can be heard around the edges of his narrator's shouting. And it, while perhaps gaining the book points for artistic merit against its censors, problematises Ellis's critique of capitalism and violence. On one hand, the fact that the narrative fails to make judgements about what it portrays gives the reader the chance to be a more active participant in the reading of the text: as Young says, "the reader is forced to scrutinize his own values and beliefs, rather than those being provided for him within a good-evil fictive universe" (100). On the other, it might also radically break fiction from its referent, rendering his critique impotent, because the reader is at once being encouraged to find a pure moral vantage point outside the borders of the text, and then relate what the text in light of that space, or the judgements it allows, says back to an outside-text. But why should they? *American Psycho* has already been divorced from its referent by its

overdetermined textual-ness and unreliability: it might be seen as a place to dip and play, not a place for precipitating political action, because it divorces itself from the reality it wants to make points about. Tanner argues that the very postmodern technique of an unreliable and undecidable narrative contributes to Bateman's domination of the reader – like the detective investigating Paul Owen's disappearance, the reader has no grounds upon which to resist Bateman because postmodernism has made such grounding impossible. Postmodernism, in other words, protects and even enables Bateman.

This is a common anti-postmodern argument, sometimes proposed on the behalf of historical materialism (see Anderson 1984 and the discussion here in Chapter one). Postmodernism, with its emphasis on textual practices, writing, play, is impotent. Its claim that the world is textual denies the impact of material forces within capitalism on the subservient and exploited classes. Because of this, nothing of material import can be done: political games are played, anti-capitalist in tone and perhaps intent, but ultimately conservative because postmodern discourses deny strong grounds upon which a materially strong anti-capitalist stand can be made (Anderson; Zavarzadeh 1995). Hence postmodernism, because of its anti-essentialism, and because it undermines meta-narratives and claims to Truth, is perceived as an attack on the possibility of classical Marxism, and is hence regarded to be in cahoots with the capitalist nomenclature. Moreover, postmodern anti-essentialism, as the argument goes, fragments oppositional voices from a unified class position into those of smaller, less potent interest groups. The politics of difference, then, allow capitalism to advance, dividing and ruling. *American Psycho*, according to this, fragments its readers' objections because the novel's status as a postmodern text gives them no clear and stable ground upon which to object to Bateman. There is no clear enemy to target, and so Bateman once again is able to fade into the background, if Bateman is read as embodying the American psychosis the novel explores.

It is, however, both the strength of this totality, and its vacancy, its impossibility, which may lead to strategies of opposition to the totalising voice, be it in *American Psycho* or in versions of capitalism generally, or any other (totalitarian) "fascism". Building totalities is ultimately impossible, based as they are on misrecognitions, fragmentation (a totality's need for its other), exclusions of that other and so forth. Hence, it remains possible to undo the paradigms of power and domination which assert

total systems. The processes which keep Bateman intact and dominant – strengthening his boundaries after he experiences a narcissistic crisis caused by an encounter with the other (suggesting fragmentation and death) – are not *necessary* processes at all. They are instead processes managed by fascism. Such management may channel the subject's streams of desire in particular directions (Theweliet 1989a, 210-28). These channels and dams need never be set up, or need never be set in concrete. In what is to come, I will propose some trajectories of meaning which could “catch out” hypermasculinity and divert it from the totalisations it supports, to lead instead to “other” alternative political stances, ones which tap into the radical emancipatory and democratic potentials of postmodernism, rather than its radical dominational potentials.

## Chapter eight

### The Totalitarian Toon

“Lisa, I am familiar with the works of Pablo Neruda.”

-Bart Simpson

This chapter begins an exploration of the politics of “cartoons”. In response to the ambivalence *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Vineland* display about cartoons (see Chapter one), we discovered that cartoons represented a loss of detail, of complexity in representation. This is often read as deterioration, or a denial of reality and of humanity. They are radically unrealistic representations, not because they represent nothing realistic, but because they are representations that call attention to their nature as stand-ins rather than displaying realism’s strategy of trying to engender belief in their “reality”. In this chapter I will suggest, though, that “cartoons” in the above sense, inhabit a space on the other side of reality – as well as being a totem of a failed realism (whether that failure is intentional or not) they also occur at the extreme end of realism, at the point at which realism becomes a totality and enacts closure. Just as the cartoon cannot exist without realism to play off, so the opposite is true: if the cartoon exists on the realist spectrum, realism exists on the cartoon one. I will also suggest, following Derrida’s deconstructive critique, that what we consider “reality” is always mediated textually. Further to this, as the closure of textual meaning is an act of suppression for Derrida, a violent act (1974, 101-40), it is also an act that privileges a way of reading the text, and hence by extension “reality” itself. Thus it is an ideological act: “the trace [is] the necessary violence of any mark, and, thus, of any institution” (Beardsworth 1996, 50). This might explain an ideology’s ability to produce a unique “reality”. But it also renders “reality” a form of writing, in that it is the product of the trace, the mark, in that a reality, as an ideology, is the product of institutions. Reality is also therefore a form of “realism”, and hence it is also something that can be included on the spectrum of cartoons. There is a similarity here to the political discussion above: a (totalitarian) “fascist” ideology that attempts to establish an absolute “reality” aestheticises politics, so that the social becomes a beautiful piece of “realist writing”. This writing is so good an example of its genre that people are

able to forget that the “reality” it produces is actually a function of power.

I suggested during the previous chapter that the most cartoonish episodes in *Gravity's Rainbow* are the ones that call attention to the absolute control the author has over the actions of his characters, Marvy and Chiclitz being set up to enact a bad pun, all the silly song-and-dance numbers. (Of course he does not have this absolute control; he can only control to a point the *meaning* of what he writes. But he can treat his characters like puppets.) Despite appearances, these episodes are not completely frivolous. If you recall, der Springer has taken the persona of chess's Knight in order to gain a third dimension, thus bringing him closer to election; this helps his black-market enterprises establish a near-monopoly in the Zone. “Pawns”, however, “are destined to creep in two dimensions” (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 494). Hence pawns of the author are two-dimensional cartoons. Pynchon's tyranny over his characters, though, is not as great as Their tyranny over the pawns of the preterite, the slave-labourers, the consumers, the exploited, those of us who sit in Richard M. Zchlubb's theatre as Their rocket thunders down upon us. All of “us” who live under Their (totalitarian) “fascist” systems, in other words, are rendered in some way two-dimensional by virtue of being subjects of (totalitarian) “fascist” ideologies. These ideologies, as we know, are “structures favouring death” (167), represented by the Rocket, and are systems that allow for no heresy, no difference. Living in a (totalitarian) “fascist” environment is equivalent to living in a cartoonish one because “reality” is aestheticised and hence “reduced” or diminished dimensionally. Fascists, therefore, are often represented alongside cartoons, and not only in critiques of fascism. There is a sense in which all totalitarian environments produce cartoon effects, and hence a sense in which “real” (totalitarian) “fascist” people can be shown to be cartoonish.

The imminence of the extreme reality of death can create cartoon-like conditions. Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) represents a particularly useful fictionalisation of this idea: Vonnegut himself, intruding as an omniscient first-person narrator into his text, notes, “There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters” (Vonnegut 1979, 140-141). Vonnegut

hints that here in the face of the truly appalling traditional realism would not be “realistic”. He spent years attempting to find a way to write about his experiences in Dresden during the firebombing of early 1945 without trivialising them. The method he finally settled upon involved what we can understand as cartooning. As well as transgressing onto the not-traditionally-realistic genres of fantasy and science fiction, the people in his book are mostly flat; the prose is childish and simple. The effect is staggeringly powerful, as powerful as the best realist treatments of inhumanity, and we are left in no doubt that Vonnegut’s book is an anti-war treatment.

Pynchon, Vonnegut’s contemporary, also seems to understand that such extreme situations and moments flatten dimensionality. *Gravity’s Rainbow* seems to suggest that dangers produce cartoon effects. After a particularly tender love scene between Jessica Swanlake and the statistician Roger Mexico during the London V-2 blitz, the life, and the convincing characterisation Pynchon temporarily grants them in the episode recedes:

...Jessica breaking down into a giggle as he reaches for the spot along her sweated flank he knows she can’t bear to be tickled in. She hunches, squirming, out of the way as he rolls past, bouncing off the back of the sofa, but making a nice recovery, and by now she’s ticklish all over, he can grab an ankle, elbow –

But a rocket has suddenly struck. A terrific blast quite close beyond the village: the entire fabric of the air, the time, is changed-the casement window blown inward, rebounding with a wood squeak to slam again as all the house shudders.

Their hearts pound. Eardrums brushed taut by the overpressure ring in pain. The invisible train rushes away close over the rooftop.

They sit still as the painted dogs now, silent, oddly unable to touch. Death has come in the pantry door: stands watching them, iron and patient, with a look that says *try to tickle me*. (59-60)

Here the rocket, personified by the appearance of death, momentarily severs the human connection that the lovers had. They are silent where before they were talking and teasing; they are “oddly unable to touch”, where before they were touching and tickling. More significantly still, David Seed notes of this scene, “Roger and Jessica are not simply interrupted by the rocket-blast, they are transformed into two-dimensional shapes. Their very reality changes” (160). Any structure favouring death produces such a flattening. The “armoured classes” of such a structure, including (totalitarian) “fascist” subjects



undergoing Liminal Processes Favouring Totality are also two-dimensional because of this.

In fact, in popular culture, cartoons seem to constantly appear in conjunction with (totalitarian) “fascists”. Later we will see that in a film starring another Roger and Jessica, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), the presence of cartoons in the “real” world exists alongside the presence of (totalitarian) “fascism”. *The Simpsons* occasionally points to this connection also. Although this programme’s satire is wide-ranging, and therefore can be expected to mention Nazis and fascism occasionally, these references tend to increase in episodes where the show becomes self-reflexive and explores the ontology of cartoons. An example is “Itchy and Scratchy Land” (Archer 1994), in which the family visits a theme park dedicated to their favourite cat-and-mouse cartoon series, “The Itchy and Scratchy Show”. Here, in “The Violentest Place on Earth”, not only do the security guards display the signification (and accents) of Nazi paramilitary personnel, but a potted biography of the show’s creator (seemingly modelled on Walt Disney) suggests that some of the central figures of the art were susceptible to fascism: “Meyer had only one lapse”, the announcer tells the audience, “his 1938 film, *Nazi Supermen Are Our Superiors*”.

This conjunction is not new. Even such a serious critic of fascism as Alice Yaeger Kaplan notes how fascist myths can be very amenable to cartoon form. While discussing the influence of F.T. Marinetti, and specifically his novel *Mafarka le futuriste* (1909), on the French fascists she studies, Kaplan mentions that:

Futurism travelled by cartoon. I discovered this when I tried to find French accounts of Italian futurism. They are conveyed almost exclusively in comics. The obscenity trial of *Mafarka*, noted in a 1910 issue of the French theatre magazine *Comoedia illustré*, is generously illustrated with the child-like cartoons of André Warnod. In 1931, *Comoedia* features caricatures of a flying Marinetti to illustrate a “Futurist Manifesto of Aeropainting”. These caricatures are the work of Ralph Soupault.... Indeed, Soupault makes the Italian futurist-French fascist connection for us. He recorded, on the one hand, the futurist banquets that followed the publication of the famous “Manifesto of Futurist Cuisine” (also known as the “Manifesto Against Pasta”), but he also stylised the anti-Semitism of the 1930s with his grotesque caricatures of the Jewish millionaire, the shtetl bum, the hook-nosed parliamentarian.... (88, 90)

This is borne out in Marinetti's novel, and indeed his manifestos. In these, the characters can only be described as cartoons. "With laughable indestructibility, they are smashed and stretched in fantastic machines, bullied by natural forces, and ambushed, only to re-emerge for a new round of adventures: they beg to be cartooned" (90). Moreover, Kaplan's analysis of Marinetti ironically suggests that fascism and fascists themselves also conform to this cartooning, and hence in important ways actually resemble their own view of the "other". Mafarka's fantasies are very similar to the "male fantasies" identified by Klaus Theweleit. This cartoon allegory creates male progeny by way of male willpower without resorting to female biological processes. He undergoes a Liminal Process Favouring Totality while wandering in a threatening "uterine" environment.

Cartoon (totalitarian) "fascists"

Reproduced in Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* is a German propaganda poster protesting the stationing of Black French troops in Germany after the First-World-War. It depicts a black soldier towering naked over a village, holding several porcelain-white, naked women against his lower torso (Theweleit, 1989a, 94). Another poster, this time an Italian World-War-Two poster targeting the invading American army, is more cartoonish. In it, a black GI is represented as a human-ape. He grins widely, is stooped, his hat hiding his eyes so there is no possibility of viewers mistaking him for a human being. He grasps a half-naked, life-sized Venus-de-Milo-type statue with "\$2" scrawled on its torso (96). The poster-makers have cartooned the GI so they can exploit several racial and cultural stereotypes at once. Firstly, the black man is depicted as being sub-human. In addition, the poster suggests that blacks are closer to "nature" than Europeans (implying, by way of the canonical European sculpture, that white men have a privileged relationship to culture). Black men are also shown to pose a sexual threat to white men by stealing "his" women; the black man is a debaser, incapable of appreciating culture; the "other" is a capitalist threat; the American is a debaser of culture through capitalism; the black man is a dark, animalistic threat to pure, white (or European) womanhood, and so on. This cartoon stereotype is used aggressively against its object, suggesting that

fascist propaganda works by portraying the other as a cartoon.

Rey Chow's article, "The Fascist Longings in Our Midst" (1995), is very enlightening in this regard. Fascism for Chow is a banality, something that through over- or perhaps mis-use has become a floating signifier that stands in negatively for any act of over-zealous authoritarianism. Through these banal ways the word is used, however, she is able to formulate a more precise description: "a term that indicates the production and consumption of a glossy surface image, a crude style, for the purposes of social identification even among intellectuals" (24). One aspect of this description is that fascism is a technological structure, a "kind of demonstrative culture/writing whose magnitude – whose portent – can only be technological. The Japanese soldier did not simply use technological weapons; he was a murder machine that happened to take the form of a man" (26), that was engaged in "a search for an idealised self-image through a heartfelt surrender to something higher and more beautiful" (26). Chow shows how this technology is related to the technologies of film through a reversal of the Freudian notion of "projection" (the Freudian structure also altered by Theweleit). Instead of being a compensation for a lack, as projection is in Freud, fascism works by a movement forward, "the projection that is obviously 'out there' – the projection that is 'being perceived'" (31). This is because the differentiation between inside and outside make no real sense in this formation: the subject takes in the fascist ideal and projects it onto the leader at the same time. What is being taken in, Chow takes pains to make clear, is the technological apparatus of film: "the very projectional mechanism of projection" (30).

Hence, in an Althusserian sense, interpellation into fascism involves the positing of fascist subjects as both spectators of film and as film itself. Film is, as we know, a two-dimensional medium, so such an interpellation will involve a giving-up of dimensions, and a retreat from "humanity". And, as Small and Levinson, and Cholodenko have pointed out, since all film can be seen as a form of animation, then it is not such a leap to regard such interpellations as interpellations as animations. Self-knowledge here is as both audience and as spectacle. Fascism involves a sense that "to be is to be perceived" (and hence aestheticised in the older sense), and hence, Chow argues, "projection, instead of being preceded by 'being', is itself the basis from which 'being' arises" (31). Here, visual technology "inhabit[s] the human shape" (32),

projection becoming a positing function rather than a negating one now that its premise is changed “from ‘inside’ to ‘surface’” (32), the question of how this happens being Chow’s major inquiry. Her suggestion is that “fascism’s production of idealism is a projectional production of luminosity-as-self-evidence” (38): that to be seen as an ideal image proves that the ideal is true and attainable.

Chow, by figuring the fascist as a piece of film, their projective mechanism situated on the surface, echoes Theweleit’s observation that the proto-fascist soldier knows no interior: his interior is exterior instead, his actual corporeal inside holding no meaning for him. Here, in place of a corporeal, and hence “real” being, stands a two-dimensional image, the real ideal structure belonging always out-there (30-31). Nothing is supposedly more banal or obvious in popular culture than the cartoon, and yet here fascists are characterised clearly as just this, cartoons, flat images, all surface, and having no interior or corporeal life. Although here the soldier’s interior and exterior are made the same, this does not mean that there is no separating off of the self and the other in this equation; as Chow says, “[the] belief, which can be ...encapsulated as ‘*we are not other*’ is fascism *par excellence*” (44). Idealisation, which requires a difficult suspension of disbelief (this once again is a point of reactivation of a Liminal Process Favouring Totality, in that the obviousness of the illusion continues to shore up defences against disbelief) sees the subject not so much lied to as willing, desperately willing, to believe in an idealised illusion. This is a purification of their corporeality to the extent that the other – the very corporeality that is being purified – becomes negated and is rendered dead matter because it cannot stand up to the ideal illusion. This is truly an ideology of destroying in order to artistically create a society.

In Theweleit’s discussion, the fascist soldier male – the masculine figure who compulsively commits violence – provides us with a further example of childhood colonising the adult. These men, according to the psychological model Theweleit has improvised to accommodate them (they do not fit any canonical model of psychological development) never attain the Oedipal phase, where they would engage in rivalry with their fathers, and would be able to sublimate their original desires for socially acceptable ones once they realise that they cannot have their original libidinal object, their mother. Instead, the military academy intervenes, “breaking and remaking” them, so that they can

become a totality component in a totality machine. This breaking and remaking process is managed ideologically by the military academy, so that the process becomes a Liminal Process Favouring Totality; in other words, so that the re-making process is indelible, and hence so that psychological birth is never attained.

This is where Theweleit's account of proto-fascism connects with Susan Buck-Morss's account of how the masses, in Walter Benjamin's essay, come to be tricked into aestheticising their own political existence. Her description of the Lacanian retroactive processes based around *corps morcelé* also describes a Liminal Process Favouring Totality operating in similar fashion to the one Theweleit outlines. This time it is shock or flooding of the sense system of the brain which reminds the subject of the *corps morcelé* fantasy, literally the breaking down of the body to be remade. For Buck-Morss, this remaking might involve closure of the sensorium, the perceptive apparatus, from connections with the world and others. The postmodern spectacle, we can infer from Buck-Morss, plays a similar role in creating subjects "not fully born" to that of the military academy. Further, this fantasy is an infant fantasy, recalled by the adult retroactively. Recalled in order to strengthen the ego constantly in the fragmented spectacular environment of postmodernism (and in the shock-filled technological environment that Walter Benjamin wrote about in the 1930s), it keeps people subject to this process from attaining the sublimations and hence minimal satisfactions available to them only after their respective Oedipal stages.

This is also an example of childhood colonising adult life. Of course, the mirror stage, which is the stage of development we are discussing, is initiated by a case of visual misrecognition, when the child mistakes his or her image in the mirror for their self, and so hides from themselves the still-fragmented nature of their body. They identify with an ego-ideal here, an idealised image which is, quite literally, an outline, in that it admits no interior. The image in the mirror conceals the fragmentation which "really" characterises the baby's body at this point of their life. The point at which the ego is armoured, through the retroactive fantasy of *corps morcelé*, which posits the ego as outside the body and on the ego-ideal in the mirror, is hence the point at which subjectivity is invested in an exterior-the ego is posited as forming on the surface of the body, while its broken interior is resisted and denied.

Hence, another connection between cartoons and fascism can be found in the notion of cartoons as inner-children of culture. It is important to note that both of our major models of fascism feature the child wearing an adult body, in Theweleit's identification of the subject not-yet-completely-born, who Theweleit compares to a psychotic child (Theweleit, 1989b, 211), and in the Lacanian retroactive fantasy of *corps morcelé* which returns narcissistic subjects to their pre-linguistic mirror-stage childhoods. Fascism also sought to reduce its subjects to a kind of childhood so that they could be subject to the guidance of the fatherly dictator, and be members of the unified family of the nation. This was the ideological rationale behind the Nazi government's undermining of the traditional family structure, effectively disenfranchising parents from their traditional roles in the development of their children, the many youth organisations doing it instead (see Shirer 1991, 252-6; Theweleit 1989b, 252-6).

Theweleit posits the *Freikorps*' ego as developing on the armoured surface of the body ("drawn from the outside" [1989a, 419]), and also on its martial extensions. These include equipment like guns and bayonets (1989b, 222-3). When the fascist kills by penetrating the "other", he experiences his self actually penetrating the desired and feared "other". The borders between them broken down momentarily, and his ego dissolved, the soldier's body re-forms more totally than before, and so also more powerfully, the space around the soldier empty and suddenly ordered, the "other" and the soldier's desire for her mastered, conquered, and annihilated. Ego-extensions also include the totality machines of the unit, the army, and the nation (ibid). These totalities all form externally, their outside borders dominating. They project themselves outward, their borders stretching. But since in all these formations identity resides specifically on its borders, they remain whole and intact, while the "other" is figured as a part of the pulpy mess that masses against them in confrontations. Military formation of the body here dams the flow of their desire, a desire they conflate with the corporeal processes that disgust them. The exterior's function, then, is to control its interior so that it becomes as if empty. They project the repressed liquid form of the other inside them out onto the formations of others they perceive as threats. This is why the proletarians always seem like a pulpy, bloody mess and the undisciplined wash of desire the soldier has been taught to hate: it is because these are the aspects of his own existence he desires (226-8; 244-9). They find

expression, rather, “out there”. Hence, these soldiers resemble cartoons: they are defined as outlines protecting an empty space, and are animated, or mobilised, from outside themselves. The fascist in Theweleit, Chow and Buck-Morss hence suffers a loss of dimensionality, as if they are a series of frames in a film, or interpellated as film. In these various studies, fascists are seen as purely visual, spectacular, flatly exterior beings, and children, all, I’ve shown, semiotics they share with cartoons.

If (totalitarian) “fascists” are cartoonish, life under (totalitarian) “fascism” is cartoonish also. In *Vineland*, Pynchon comments that Vond’s strength was to see in the left-wing rebels he’s captured the desire for order, to be children safe within the national family presided over by a benevolent presidential father figure. As we have seen, *Vineland* puts a considerable amount of blame for the success of (totalitarian) “fascism” in contemporary America on the Spectacle, television in particular. This is an observation Susan Buck-Morss also makes, when she connects the Spectacle to the continuing relevance of Benjamin’s characterisation of fascism as the aestheticisation of politics. Certainly Bret Easton Ellis in both *Less Than Zero* and *American Psycho* sees the Spectacle as a prime environment for engineering Liminal Processes Favouring Totality. It should not be surprising, then, in the context of the theoretical construct we have just been developing, that the spectacle can also be characterised as a cartoonish environment.

### Tooning the body through beauty standards

In *American Psycho*, the powerful armoured cartoons such as Patrick Bateman render their others, particularly women, cartoonish. The potential victim is first made a cartoon and then eliminated. The corporate world is one of competition, action, power – all traits conventionally gendered masculine. Men in this book are constructed as dominant oppressors, while women are constructed as victims. *American Psycho* is profoundly about what Naomi Wolf calls “The Beauty Myth” (1990), about the cult of beauty in consumer culture in the late 1980s and its effects on women. Wolf shows how corporate interests have identified the body as a site for selling women items and services such as clothes, cosmetics and cosmetic surgery. To maximise the potential of women’s

bodies for marketing, strategies of control have emerged, installing a standard of beauty for women to aspire to. Naturally, to do this requires women to purchase the very items that the interests who have set up the standard wish to sell. Wolf's critique centres on the fact that the standard that's been set into place is impossible to reach. Women are under pressure to be thin, to have unblemished and unwrinkled skin, and to look youthful, no matter what their age is. Marks of individuality are thus discouraged. Hence, just as women were emerging as a force in late capitalist society (in the wake of the powerful feminist movements of the 1970s and the early 1980s) their economic power was undermined because it was channelled into buying consumer items, the "need" for which was manufactured out of thin air. Along with this, women's self-esteem is constantly undermined by the beauty myth because the unattainable standard it expects them to meet makes ordinary people feel unattractive and less worthwhile. (If women don't meet these standards, they have fewer opportunities for advancement in the corporate world, as prejudices against those who are rendered "ugly" and "old" are exercised by those with power. Hence the corporate interests who set the rules are able to enforce them by punishing people who don't abide by them yet still want to advance.)

In *American Psycho*, Bateman and his colleagues unthinkingly buy into this standard of beauty for women, only ever desiring "hardbodies" who look like fashion models. They usually dismiss normal-looking people. Bateman meets a woman from his apartment block at his cleaners'; she is "older than me, late twenties, okay-looking, a little overweight, wearing a jogging suit-from where, Bloomingdale's? I have no idea-and she's... *beaming*" (84). A woman's body is only remotely attractive to these men if the woman is young – most are in their early twenties or younger – and physically perfect. Intelligent women are looked upon with mild suspicion. The slightest physical blemish puts the stockbrokers off: a group of them are initially taken by a waitress in a restaurant. "She is *hot*.... Hardbody.... Definitely" (47), they comment. But Price is not so impressed: "'Look at her knees'.... While the hardbody stands there we check her out, and though her knees do support long, tan legs, I can't help noticing that one knee is, admittedly, bigger than the other one. The left knee is knobbier, almost imperceptibly thicker than the right knee and this unnoticeable flaw now seems overwhelming and we all lose interest" (47-48).



This woman is defined by the harsh gaze of a male-imposed, impossible-to-meet beauty standard. She has been completely dehumanised: not only is she identified as simply “the hardbody”, but she becomes monstrous for being in the slightest measure asymmetrical. Wolf points out that the standard by which beauty is judged now is arrived at by filters and tricks anyway – fashion photos are altered to make the models look thinner than they are; photos are altered so that anorexic models’ ribcages don’t show through their skin; models alter themselves through cosmetic surgery: liposuction, breast enhancement, facelifts, lip enhancement and so forth. Bateman at one point watches a *Patti Winters Show* on breast reduction surgery and simply cannot comprehend why any woman would want to have such an operation (68).

The male characters in *American Psycho* are also subjected to a masculine beauty myth. This myth manifests itself in their exercise regimes, their cosmetics, their clothes, their desire for tans, for definition in their muscles and so forth – all the things which make the stockbrokers look the same as one another, in fact. It is interesting to note, however, that while the myth shapes both masculine and feminine behaviours for its ends, the pressure on women’s bodies impels them to take up less space, while that on men’s impels them to take up more, to expand, and to become harder and more muscular. In this novel, the bodies of each sex are analogous to ideal bodies under the sign of Nazism, and the same can be said for their respective social roles: the male is active – he is encouraged to eat, to fill up space with his muscles and his social role in business and elsewhere, while the woman is encouraged to be passive, to take up less social and physical space, even if it is at the cost of her not eating.

### Living the cartoon life

Even if there is no escape from the signification “cartoon” in totalitarian conditions, all is not lost. While being a cartoon in the terms set up by *American Psycho* appears to necessitate taking part in the dichotomy of oppressor/victim (on one or the other side), the meaning of cartoons can also inflect in directions that escape this structure. These inflections of meaning are suggested by Pynchon, and also by the film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, and they lead to the possibility of erecting a provisional

structure of identity that has certain beneficial characteristics. In finding this structure, it is necessary to separate out for our purposes two types of cartoon, which I will present in the next chapter.

What I've been outlining up to now is the way the term "cartoon" has been used in critical practices, the way cartoons can be regarded as secondary or wasted representations, ones that fail to connect with their audience in any high-art or "human" way, despite the fact that realism exists on the same spectrum as cartoons. This critical practice, then, tends toward hierarchised binarisms, in our case between a cartoon and a "realised" character. This duality comes from a more basic opposition, the one between fiction and reality, or between a representation of a subject and the subject him or herself. As "just" a representation, the cartoon is a fictional creation (a drawing) suggesting the existence of a fictional self which in turn implies the existence of a creator, a drawer. This creator exists on the outside; he or she is the cartoon's other. The cartoon cannot exist without this originary other: the existence of a cartoonist is a pre-condition for the existence of the cartoon. This person is assumed to be the artist, the writer, the animator, or all of the above. The real person, on the other hand, supposes him or herself to be an individual entity—three dimensional, stable, biological (natural), corporeal. As something natural, the real, stable (non-fictional) subject's existence is not subject to the pre-existence of a creative mind: it is itself's, not somebody else's. The language it speaks is its own words, not words placed on it by an artist to make a point, or to impose a set of characteristics from the outside. The real person has self determination; he or she is distinct from what is other to them, and so is not animated (given motion, given life) or controlled by that other.

If the "real" subject is someone who exists in reality, a "real" person, then the constitution of "real" subjectivity problematises its own reality. This is because the stable self is always already something else, always already its own other. This is what Lacan reminds us of in the "Mirror Stage", when the infant's image of its own wholeness and self-consciousness is predicated on its identifying with an image, and taking that image as itself. The infant is mistaken, and so the image's promise of a stable body is empty. The Oedipal subject is grounded in an act of misreading, a mistaken interpretation. Thereafter, in times of narcissistic crisis, this mistake haunts the real

person in the form of a retroactive fantasy where the body is experienced in fragments. It is in the sense that the image is mistaken for reality but is an idealisation that the self is based on a fiction, the fiction, or idea, of satisfying wholeness, a wholeness that is impossible. Hence the fictional is associated with the fragmentation which haunts “real” people, and it is thus the myriad categories of “fiction” – the not-true, the not-real – which threaten the wholeness and stability promised by the mirror. This stable wholeness requires that the self have borders to distinguish it from its other; otherwise it in no sense can be entirely whole and autonomous. Stability and autonomy run hand in hand. So the stable self, which has privileged this “pleasingly whole” account of itself, is in fact dependent on its “other” – that which is fragmented, malleable, dependent on its “other”, not separate from it. The “other” of the self that is assumed from the mirror stage is the image that the child sees in the mirror: its self is based on something else, and so this self must have part of its existence elsewhere, not within the self’s boundaries. The self is thus constituted outside its own boundaries; there could be no self without the other.

If, then, the self is based on a fiction – the fiction of the “pleasingly whole” image it misreads from a glimpse in the mirror – if its boundaries are fictional, it becomes difficult for a real, stable, autonomous person to easily separate itself from its other, the fragmented, cartoon-representation person. In the Warner Brothers cartoon “Duck Amuck” (Jones 1953), Daffy Duck is confident of his boundaries and his role as the central figure of his cartoon. After all the cartoon is “starring Daffy Duck”. He has a name; he speaks “I”. He begins the cartoon with the confident swagger he reserves for shows of his masculinity, but is perturbed when a cartoon pencil alters the background scene, making his costume anachronistic. Before long the duck is appealing to his creator, the cartoonist, to give him a steady set, and a role to play. This does not happen: instead, the set is erased altogether, and then Daffy himself is erased except for eyes and beak, and re-drawn in several highly comical new ways. At one point the film becomes stuck and Daffy finds himself “doubled”, captured in two frames at once, each frame containing its own Daffy. Hence it is suggested that it is only by the intervention of the technologies that allow animation that these multiple Daffies become the relatively consistent Daffy we are used to. This surreal and playful short film thus reveals for Daffy his fictional nature. He is a creature who exists in the symbolic order, and so he is open

to misreading and reinterpretation by forces beyond his reach. Daffy's malleable, fragmentary and contingent nature are parts of himself he doesn't want to admit to having. At one point he flies into a fit of temper when his mirror image is obviously "not right". But, you may object, isn't it the creator of the cartoon, the "real" person pulling Daffy's strings, who is analogous to the author? And he or she is still set up in opposition to the cartoons on the screen: "Duck Amuck" retains, surely, the "real" person/ cartoon person separation. Everyone already knows that the cartoon is a cartoon; they assume that the creator of the cartoon is not a cartoon. However, at the end of the film the camera pulls off cartoon space, and follows the (cartoon) pencil that has been tormenting Daffy, until we glimpse its user, none other than Bugs Bunny.

The cartoonist here is a cartoon himself; the film seems to suggest that cartoonists have a part of their identity constituted by cartoons. Perhaps in order to create characters like Daffy Duck the adult animator must confront his or her "inner child", which is where the cartoonist comes from (see Herron 19-24). The "real" cartoonist remains hidden under a cartoon name in the credits: the only access we have to an assumed "real" creator is a textual signifier. In this case the director is Charles M. Jones, but here he is just two cartooned words. The "real" creators' own identity signifiers were occasionally subject to slippage as well. Moreover, Warner Brothers' animation was a team effort, something the credits only occasionally reflect accurately (in addition, the credits to "Duck Amuck" are in the style of the first scene of the film, when that scene is deliberately altered on Daffy Duck on a continuing basis). This cartoon demonstrates that there *is* no line to cross, no line over which you can say for sure that here is a fiction and here is reality. "Real" people may invent or construct a line which does make the distinction, but this line, like the fact that the mirror stage is based on a misrecognition, will be temporary because it is a "non-real" line, a frame, a metaphor, a reading act. As Derrida wrote, "there is nothing outside of the text [also translated as 'there is no outside-text']" (Derrida 1974, 158).

"Real" people are all textual, fictions or cartoons. They are all "drawn" in some way, whether by themselves in identifying with an incompletely drawn image in the mirror, by others inscribing meaning on their lives and bodies, or by themselves in conjunction with others through the mirrors, after Althusser, of whole and pleasing

ideologies to which they become subject. The “real” person has difficulty keeping its boundaries intact because those boundaries are (real) fictions. Or rather they are real limits which are fictional too. Here, the surplus quantities of the other haunt the self. To set boundaries is to exaggerate: to exaggerate the self’s ability to remain stable, to dam out the other that it is constructed upon. Thus by setting (solid) boundaries the self necessarily privileges (exaggerates?) one feature of existence. To privilege or draw attention to a particular feature of a person is to caricature that person. So, by setting solid boundaries in order to establish our “reality” as separate from “non-reality”, we become caricatures.

### *The drawing of lines*

Boundary setting is an act necessary for human coherence; there needs to be some agreement on meaning or communication cannot take place. There has to be some closure – however arbitrary – to syntactical freeplay, or communication and thus social interaction would become simply impossible. Julia Kristeva recognises this by her refusal to privilege the semiotic – the feminine-identified pre-Oedipal and pre-lingual stage of the abject – over the symbolic, the masculine-identified systems of language. She recognises that to do so is to cut yourself off from the possibility of forming a community and so effectively activates a radical solipsism (see Lechte, 130). Lyotard appeals to micronarratives, or belief systems which are provisional, local, fragmented, but which nonetheless are capable of being recognisable, of guiding us (Lyotard 78-81). Even the arch-sceptic Derrida admits that although language cannot close off syntactical freeplay, it can still posit meanings that can be understood. As Richard Beardsworth points out, “[a]n aporia demands decision, one cannot remain within it” (1996, 5). In his essay “Signature Event Context” (1977), Derrida concedes that language has effects in the world, although these don’t exclude the effect of writing, which is the aspect of language which opens freeplay and puts the foot in the door of closure (17-19), so that “the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the *entire* scene and system of utterance” (18, emphasis mine). So, as Elizabeth Grosz notes in reference to Derrida and his relationship with

feminist discourse, “Derrida insists over and over that deconstruction must be understood as a mode of affirmation, indeed as a mode of double affirmation. In a feminist context this means that discourses influenced by or in some way involved in deconstruction are committed to *both* an affirmation, a saying-yes to patriarchy (the gesture of phallogentrism) *and* an affirmation of feminism, the overcoming of patriarchy” (Grosz, 1995, 116). Derrida would be the first to admit that his own writings are as susceptible to deconstructive readings as any other, and hence that he is hardly himself telling the truth of any subject. He does, however, still write, and yet he does so whilst calling attention to writing’s vulnerabilities, using puns and allusions, a disregard of traditional philosophic method, and other tricks so to affirm both the readability of his writing and the limits of that readability.

In an essay of Julia Kristeva’s on Roland Barthes, she makes the point more directly. She writes: “any sentence is both syntax and non-sentence, normative unicity and disorderly multiplicity; any sequence is both myth and the melting pot where it is engendered and dies through its own history...” (1980, 99). The structure of *both* the thing *and* its structural opposite she offers here recalls Derrida’s. Language may offer a myth, the myth of transparent communication (of reality, maybe), and that myth may be seen-through, revealed, and thus undermined at every turn. Kristeva’s invocation of history recalls the idea of iterability, the repeatability of language which is necessary for it to be understood, but which makes understanding it a most precarious undertaking. Language’s mythical status, opposed to its status as reality, cannot close that other off, so that the reality of a language that actually works, despite itself, is a precondition of its demystification as myth, is unreal. Hence a sentence is *both* unified and normal *and* at the same time disordered and multiple. It is impossible to pin down language, but people do, and do it so well so often that the myth of meaning and truth’s closure through transparent language is able to continue to hold currency.

So for language to be used, and thus for life to take place in the world – given that you cannot speak of or give any meaning to what is outside the text, because “nothing” is – boundary setting is a necessary act. And yet this is the act that fictionalises the subject, putting our identities on the continuum of cartoons. To live therefore is to caricature *yourself*. In other words, you can *only* live if you are a caricature, a cartoon, because

being so you are part of the symbolic order, the symbolic order which resides in a fictional construction, based upon a metaphysics which necessitates boundaries. As such, it is a “reduction”. The inanimate, the drawing, is here genuinely animated into the necessary condition for real life. You cannot be a “real”, stable subject without becoming a cartoon, without fictionalising yourself. The cartoon version of the person precedes the “real” person. This claim has its corollary in Cholodenko’s point that “live-action” cinema was preceded by and predicated on developments in animation, and William Slothrop’s that “election” is preceded by and predicated upon “preterition”. So, as the existence of a painting depends on its preliminary sketch, its cartoon, so subjectivity depends on the prior existence of a cartoon version of the self, a simplified representation with which the subject identifies. The cartoon, once marginalised, once secondary to the “reality” it represents, now claims the centre of this discourse of representation, it now precedes what it represents.

But it is not enough to say that the outline, the preliminary, the cartoon is the privileged instance of life. That would be to say the cartoon person is more “real” than the real one, when such categories are clearly unsustainable. Within the symbolic order as it is currently constituted, the obvious cartoon is abjected. This can be seen in Jan Chilwell’s implication that the cartooned character represents sickness and waste, and in the general tendencies of critics that we have looked at to dismiss or discount cartoon representations unless they are in their “place”. Chilwell distrusts the visceral nature of *Natural Born Killers*, privileging the intellectual, cultural constructs of narrativity and coherence, stability, the “real” person. The cartoon is “passed over” by serious art because it provides a site where the stable “real” self falls into its own fictionality – where the stable self’s fictional nature can become revealed. It is a place where the ego is dispersed. It is in-between, an “excluded middle”, a trace that haunts the privileged signs of presence. Derrida names some of these tropes, ones he has discovered in philosophic and literary discourse, similar to one another, yet different too: *parergon*, *writing*, *différance*, *dissemination*, the *supplement*, the *hymen*, the *pharmakon*, the *gram*, *spacing*, the *incision*, the *spectre*. Alan Cholodenko, in light of his reading of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, proposes an addition to this list: the *Toon* (1991b, 12; 234).

Hence much of Pynchon’s novels and *American Psycho* are written as cartoons, in

the sense that they obviously (and deliberately) fall short of the standards of realism. This is partly to signify, as metafictional writers might, the reflexive and fictional (and hence contingent and relative) nature of identity. This reflexivity is politicised in these novels: because the cartoon aspect of postwar Western, and hence corporate capitalist identity is revealed in these novels, the “truth” of the ideology that produces and manages these identities is immediately put under question. In other words, where the prevalent ideology would establish its “truth” – that the world it creates is the “real” world – the presence of cartoons in this “real” world, impossible as they must be, reveals reality as an effect of ideology. They prevent the closure of an ideology *into* reality, when this closure is the aim of any (totalitarian) “fascist” ideology. The presence of a cartoon in the “reality” of a (totalitarian) “fascism”, in other words, is an aporia at which the (totalitarian) “fascism” deconstructs.



## Chapter nine

### Tooning Us On to Love and Laughter

*These pigs wanna blow my house down...*

-Cypress Hill

#### Roger's abnegatory and accepting toon types

If a (totalitarian) "fascist" environment resembles a "cartoon", then the presence of "cartoons" in Pynchon's and Ellis's novels makes more sense<sup>1</sup>. This chapter asks if this is the end point to the critique such a fictional tactic implies, or is there more to the "cartoon" than this relative banality? There are aspects to "cartoons", however, that make their presence in such postmodern narratives more complex and more useful, explaining perhaps the ambiguity about cartoons we encountered in Pynchon's novels. Here, it is only a starting point to say that "spectacle capitalism reduces our humanity in the same way that totalitarianism does; both make life a cartoon." One can also say: "when life becomes a cartoon, we can tell that conditions are approaching the totalitarian (where a set of ideas and ideological assumptions dominate all aspects of society); life in postmodernity is cartoonish, so one could read it as totalitarian." What if, however, the condition of being "cartoonish" was not merely a diagnosis of a social malaise, but also a cure?<sup>2</sup>

There is a certain irony in the apparent fact that the more a culture suppresses its "cartoon" image, the more that image insists, insinuating itself back into the centre of that culture. But this is no more "ironic" than any deconstruction: it is simply the trace of the other undermining full presence. "Cartoons" are the antithesis of the (totalitarian) "fascist" personality: where (totalitarian) "fascism" attempts to enact absolute closure,

---

<sup>1</sup> By implying inverted commas to this term, I hope to signify "cartoon" in a broad sense, meaning not only recognisable cartoon characters and motifs, but, as well, what Bruce Bawer disparaged as "diminishing fictions" (1988): reduced representation, thinly-drawn characters and plots, self-referring fictions, and self-consciously constructed characters and situations, that fail to live up to "the promise of the novel".

<sup>2</sup> Readers of Derrida will find this idea familiar: the *pharmakon*, both a poison and a cure (see Derrida [1981]). Alan Cholodenko's discussion of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, which I refer to below, centres his

“cartoons” represent openness or at least a degree of non-closure. As incompletions, they do not limit possible outcomes, or even promise an ending or a completion to a representation at all. Also, as an incompleteness, they signify the absence of completion – the “cartoon”’s “cartoon-ness” exists in the gap between what is and what is perceived as what *should* or *might* be – between the representation as it is and perfect representation. As such, it partakes in the “feminine” as the (totalitarian) “fascist” experiences it – those “feminine gaps” that in Marinetti’s novel the fantasy of Mafarka’s perfect progeny is capable of covering over and making whole and complete (see Kaplan, 81). And, hence, from a masculinist or a (totalitarian) “fascist” viewpoint, the “cartoon’s” impurity, its status as “waste” and as a “deterioration” as popular culture of the proletariat, links it also with the “feminine” forces the (totalitarian) “fascist” attempts desperately to keep at bay.

This, then, represents a pessimistic reading of the presence of “cartoons” in a masculinist culture. They may be the antithesis of (totalitarian) “fascism”, but they are also how we can recognise it – that when everything around you seems cartoonish, (totalitarian) fascism is a factor in the social environment. This is why the totalitarian “Rocket State” in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is portrayed as a cartoon and identified as fascist (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 677). Their presence is important to the ideology’s survival, because all the semiotics of “cartoons” as incomplete, as “flow”, may cause (totalitarian) “fascist” subjects to reinforce “body armour”, their reaction to the chaotic forces of deterioration, waste, childishness and frivolity, armour that covers over “feminine gaps”. Cartoons are figures which transgress boundaries. But instead of doing so in order to expand the boundaries of a “totality machine” they are part of (hence continually pushing the liminal “between states” to the exterior so it is always in front), they transgress over the border between the states, becoming in part one thing, in part its other. The (totalitarian) “fascist”, colonising the other’s space, remains on “his” side, but the cartoon is a hybrid. These figures tend to be abject quantities in Pynchon and Ellis’s texts, located at “the place where I am not and which permits me to be” (Kristeva 1982, 3), the place Julia Kristeva ascribes to the feminine. The exclusion of abject substances enables the “T”, and are the “primers of my culture” (2). In this sense “culture” refers to the

---

argument around this concept, although I have marginalised it in my discussion of Cholodenko (and *Roger Rabbit*).

symbolic order, identified in Kristeva with the paternal law (1984a, 457). This culture is “primed” by a Liminal Process Favouring Totality, so that the “father” is the stern masculinist father of Freud rather than the amalgam of mother-father Kristeva posits. Under the traditional Freudian model the symbolic order will be as oppressive to women as critics such as Irigaray claim [1985]). As an abject quantity of representation, not “real” but permitting the “real”, the “cartoon” is neither subject nor object. But it can be seen, perversely, as a stand-in for all those things that, negatively, enable the (totalitarian) “fascist” masculinist culture by fuelling the drive outwards that the Soldier Males analysed in *Male Fantasies* experience. On the other hand, “cartoons” show up a vulnerability in that system, should a way be found to exploit it.

If “cartoons” represent a radically undecidable element in the Derridian sense, then the question for us is how this category can begin to favour a non-(totalitarian) “fascist” politics of the sort that Pynchon advocates. How can one take the decision to privilege the incompleteness of cartoons over their solid outlines without once again closing the “lighted doorway” (*Vineland*, 235), and recreating the structure of totality, only with its categories reversed? This will be the key with which we will try to unlock Pynchon’s ambivalence about “cartoons”. After all, the strength of totalistic systems is their insistence upon clear, enforceable decision making. If an opponent of (totalitarian) “fascism” sustains undecideability because the absolute decision is a (totalitarian) “fascist” construct, they are at a significant tactical disadvantage because it will be hard for them to work toward objectives. What is more, such undecideability will make this opposition seem like a chaotic rabble to those in power. The (totalitarian) “fascist” will perceive them as a lowly-cultured “flood”, and will, as a reflex, build armoured dams against them. They will be the object of their opponents’ Liminal Processes Favouring Totality, in a sense fuelling the dominance of the dominant paradigms while remaining a fragmented and weak force themselves, somewhat like the Counterforce.

A way forward lies in a closer look at one construction of difference within the category of “cartoons”. That is the possibility that there are different states of existence for cartoons, in our case ones linked to (totalitarian) “fascism” and ones capable of opposing it. At the end of Chapter two, I suggested that a vital point of difference between resistant and co-optable strategies in Pynchon’s novels may lie in the degree to

which the “system” of each is delusional. Here I have suggested that there is a kind of “delusional” element to realism not shared by reflexive fiction. Reviewers sometimes unconsciously reinforce this by suggesting that cartoon elements have no place in realism, but are appropriate if they keep within their own realm (cartoonish texts), where you get the impression they can be safely ignored. This we-are-not-other of realism hides realism’s textual and graphic nature, that it holds similarities to cartoonishness itself. This suggests a difference between a cartoon which behaves as if it were “real”, and the more “knowing” one that behaves like a cartoon. One of the best texts to help interrogate this possibility is Robert Zemeckis’s film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988). Although sometimes regarded as no more than a clever piece of Hollywood entertainment, a “cartooney” *Noir* pastiche, *Roger Rabbit* is actually one of popular cinema’s more astute examinations of the psychology of prejudice. This is demonstrated by the relationship between people and “toons” in the film. The film concerns a detective who hates “toons”, but who is forced to work for a cartoon rabbit who is on the run after being “framed” for the murder of cartoonist Marvin Acme. This forces the detective, Eddie Valiant, to face and overcome his fear of cartoons, a fear expressed as prejudice throughout.

Here we can see that the two types of cartoon correspond to the (totalitarian) “fascist”/non-(totalitarian) “fascist” ambivalences that we have been interrogating. I think that the hypermasculine or (totalitarian) “fascist” figure belongs to the first category, the abnegatory cartoon – he is outline and nothing more, because that more threatens him: he wants to be “real” and yet he pathologically fears the reality of his body. His interior is chaotic, holds no meaning for him, is an empty space. His personal boundaries are like dams that block out flows of the “other”. They are solid, fortified outlines. Theweleit postulates that he has no psychological depth, because his armoured bodily outline itself forms the ego (see Theweleit 1989b, 206-225). The emphasis is on the primacy of the boundary, a boundary which is created as if artistically: “[t]he body did acquire boundaries, of course, but they were *drawn* from the outside, by the disciplinary agencies of imperialist society. We can see why fascist propaganda and social practice places such great emphasis on setting boundaries of all kinds” (1989a, 418 [my emphasis – in the original, Theweleit emphasises the words “*from the outside*”]).

Any threat to this outline draws the response of a terrible violence because it is so brittle, paradoxically. This cartoon – a self-caricature to which the only response is to laugh *at* it – acknowledges no intermediate spaces between itself and its other. It is cut clearly and firmly demarcated. In literature, the appearance of such a cartoon can be read as a point of critique, of complaint and of satire. It asks us to accept or reject it, to participate in its own project of othering.

The obvious example of this (totalitarian) “fascist” toon is Judge Doom in *Roger Rabbit*, played by Christopher Lloyd as a human throughout the film. The Judge, who imposes “Law” onto the ludic chaos of the L.A. suburb of Toontown, (more than this, he believes he *is* the law) separates the toon and the real person thoroughly. His political agenda, in alliance with various monopolistic capitalist interests (all owned by himself, in a gesture toward totalisation), is nothing other than the destruction of Toontown itself, and the genocide of the toons as a “class” or “race”. Toward the end of the film, the judge is unmasked, and we find out that he’s actually a toon in disguise, although he tells us, “not just any toon”, but one who has managed to “become” human and deny his toonhood. Under his human outline is a toon, a fact the Judge cannot accept in himself. Doom’s fear is that laughter – which defines the toon in the movie – will lead to his death. He is afraid that the toon he has caged or frozen within himself, and that he does not recognise, will overwhelm his exterior should laughter release it. His interior has lost all meaning for him; his ego, such as it is, is located on the exterior and faces only outward. This denial of his toon-ness is expressed with his violence, and by the fact that Doom is dressed in the stereotyped dress of the Nazi S.S. throughout the film, and speaks in a kind of harsh, mid-European-influenced accent.

In contrast to him are the toons who dwell in Toontown. They are toons who are comfortable with toonhood. Toontown is the site of carnivalesque freeplay. This play is usually extreme enough to make humans uncomfortable when they are there (toons are quite capable of living outside of Toontown but not many “real” people, uncomfortable with their “toon” within, can go into there). These toons are more open and aware of their place in-between. They are not entirely ludic – they can form boundaries and symbolise, and communicate with people and one another, but they don’t like any order to form for so long that it becomes staid and institutional, and they are flexible enough to

dissolve and re-set their borders if need be. This is why they are capable of living in the regular Los Angeles. Toontown is a place that has little need for the (totalitarian) “fascist” power that Judge Doom proposes to control it with. These toons are toons of the second type, ones “real” people might do well to learn from, as they are both of the order of the toon and of the order of the real. Such a figure can use law, symbols, structures and paradigms while they usefully promote love, justice and good fun, and change to something else when the paradigms become repressive and thus useless for such values. Just as they can survive a piano falling on their head and bounce back to life, they are flexible enough to survive the “real” when it hits them.

As Alan Cholodenko implies, the film’s lesson comes specifically in the form of a learning experience for Eddie Valiant (Cholodenko 1991b, 218-19). His brother having been killed years ago by a toon (he had a piano dropped onto his head, a crime for which the Judge eventually claims credit<sup>3</sup>), Valiant has come to mistrust toons, because, understandably, they represent death to him. But Eddie is not nearly as separate from toons as he would like to believe. In fact, he has toon qualities: he is flattened in a plunging elevator at one point in the film and recovers; he is dressed up as a cartoon rabbit in a photo with his late brother. So his denial of toons represents a denial of a part of himself, and so this denial has traces of death in it as well. His life is a mess, and his detective agency is badly in decline, all of which has happened since he stopped visiting Toontown. Added to this is the fact that he is in an unsuccessful relationship with a barmaid, Delores, who he constantly disappoints. Cholodenko points out that death hence haunts Valiant: “Death plays in the names of the brothers – Ed die (die, died, ded) and Teddie (with its ‘T’ sliding into ‘D’ as well as into ‘T’ for ‘Toon’). Not irrelevant here is the name of Eddie’s girlfriend – Del ores, from *dolor*, *dolorosus*, which mean sorrow, grief, mourning in Latin; and Valiant contains the significantly incomplete ‘liv’ and ‘aliv’ and a complete ‘vital’, etc” (219).

Eddie finds, of course, that the Rabbit case, which he took on in part to keep his agency in business, necessitates his long-overdue return to Toontown, and to do this, he has to overcome an immense psychological barrier. Roger and Jessica Rabbit get

---

<sup>3</sup> Like any other “Soldier Male”, the judge appears to meld into his (toon) “other” as he kills: he murders as a toon.

themselves into mortal danger, becoming prisoners of Doom. Quite literally the necessity to save life forces Eddie's hand and he makes the trip back to Toontown, and hence back to toonhood. Cholodenko:

This means that Eddie Valiant is always already Roger Rabbit, Bugs Bunny, always already a toon, too. And this allows this narrative to be a narrative of the return of the repressed, of poison and cure (*pharmakon*), where Death, in the forms of Judge Doom and the Dip (both *pharmakons*), 'dies' and Eddie's 'death', his mourning and melancholia, can 'die' so he can 'live' again (regaining his sexual vitality en route, his rabbitness so aptly figured in Delores' query, "is that a rabbit in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?"). And what returns is the toon in Eddie, which would parallel the return of the repressed of "animation" to "live action" film and its institutions, including film studies. This return has the ironical effect of declaring that Eddie Valiant is alive and human only to the degree that he is at the same time a toon, animated by the other... (219)

So, the Judge is a toon/human who does not acknowledge the fact, and is willing to commit genocide to cover up this knowledge, while Eddie is a toon/human who, while he does not acknowledge the fact displays something akin to racial prejudice, but once the fact is acknowledged becomes a living person capable of love and connection.

### Toward a better world

Such a movement is implicit in Julia Kristeva's claims that love, which she praises, can lead in the psyche to what she calls an "open system" (1984b, 5). I'll explain how this can happen soon. But first, it is important to note that this development has already been prefigured in the film of *Roger Rabbit* itself. Three features of cartoon representation are privileged in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*: love, laughter, and democracy. All three work against the (totalitarian) "fascist" significations of Judge Doom. Doom intervenes in Jessica and Roger Rabbit's love relationship; when he has been defeated, they reconcile romantically. The admission to himself of a cartoon-type aspect of his personality also helps Eddie find love with Delores by the end of the film. And, perhaps most significantly, Eddie finally responds with love to Roger. From the time they meet, Roger annoys Eddie by occasionally kissing him on the lips. Eddie responds with a revulsion that is most likely a mixture of homophobia and "cartophobia",

a mixture that indicates Eddie's general desire to keep the other at a distance from himself. Once Eddie has accepted that he is both person and cartoon, though, he becomes capable of returning Roger's cartoon love, and demonstrates this by kissing the rabbit on the lips at the end of the film.

Similarly, laughter can defeat the (totalitarian) "fascist". Doom is terrified of laughter, convinced that it leads to death. It does, of course, but only through laughter's privileged status in the discourse of the liminal – the death of the total self in the other. Throughout the film, cartoons *are* laughter. Roger cannot be a "toon" and snap out of his handcuffs against the laws of physics unless he does so when the act is likely to be funny. (Eddie, at the time denying the toon haunting his personality, does not laugh.) Such hilarity is associated by Doom with chaos, which we've learned to read here as a stand-in for the death of a certain type of masculine self by way of the threatening feminine. The loss of masculine self-control represented by laughter and hence the toons thus introduce death because it crosses the borders of the self and flirts with liminality. This is confirmed as a specifically (*totalitarian*) "*fascist*" viewpoint by *Vineland's* Brock Vond:

Once, not too many years ago, sober, wide awake, he'd begun to laugh at something on the Tube. Instead of reaching a peak and then tapering off, the laughter got more intense each time he breathed, diverging toward some brain state he couldn't imagine, filling and flooding him, his head taken and propelled by a supernatural lightness, on some course unaccounted for by the usual three dimensions. He was terrified. He glimpsed his brain about to turn inside out like a sock but not what would happen after that. At some point he threw up, broke some cycle, and that, as he came to see it, was what "saved" him – some component of his personality in charge of nausea. Brock welcomed it as a major discovery about himself – an unsuspected control he could trust now to keep him safe from whatever his laughter had nearly overflowed him into. He was careful from then on not to start laughing so easily. All around him those days he was watching people his age surrendering to dangerous gusts of amusement, even deciding never to return to regular jobs and lives.... (*Vineland* 278-9)

Here it is a Liminal Process Favouring Totality, originating in an abject experience, which saves Brock from the flows of the "feminine other" he has dedicated his life to damming. But he is quite aware of the revolutionary potential of laughter, how people can be caught by it and carried away in its flows, to end up in another state of being altogether.



Thirdly, once love and laughter – and hence the toon – reign supreme in *Roger Rabbit*, then democracy is realised. After the Judge's death, which represents the death of oppressive power, Marvin Acme's last Will and Testament is discovered, bequeathing Toontown to the toons. The toons thereupon find that they suddenly have control of their destiny, and are free of Doom's domination. The Judge wanted to steal and destroy this Will, so that his venture could proceed, a venture which creates capital out of thin air – first build a transport system, and this creates a whole series of service needs and wants from which to profit. But the will had been hidden as a palimpsest, a writing that exists beneath the (totalitarian) "fascist" gaze. Like love and laughter, the form of democracy the toons end up with can be worked out theoretically in reference to ideas of liminality and open systems.

As it happens, these three categories, love, laughter, and democracy are each formulated by different theorists as categories which defy the dualism that denies the other and favours totality. Love sets the subject into process to become an "open system", defying the closure caused by Liminal Processes Favouring Totality. Laughter is a "practice" and a "transgression" that also opens up a liminal space, but instead of producing totality it favours the production of the new. And radical democracy, at least as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe theorise it, also produces the new, new hegemonies based on a provisional identity within a context of difference, creating an open political "horizon" rather than a closed and totalised one. All of these categories partake in the logic cartoons open up, that of a double affirmation, the being one thing and its other at the same time. Love and laughter, by being "open systems", may be able to enable plural, open democracy.

### Love

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf suggests that male love for women as human beings is part of the end result if the battle against misogyny were to be won, and is also the best way to bring such a victory about (Wolf, 142-3). The beauty myth constantly keeps the sexes in conflict, constructing one as the enemy of the other, thus keeping them apart. It ultimately ensures the unhappiness of both sexes, as genuine psychic love

becomes impossible because women remain objects for male spectatorship. Theweleit, meanwhile, suggests that love relationships between men and women cannot “keep the other at a distance”, because this is “a recipe for psychological terror” (1989b, 268). Men must, he quotes Elaine Morgan, “come on in, the water’s [femininity’s] lovely” (269), but cannot do so without withdrawing in terror, if they do not first give up psychological aggressiveness: “... the first step must be for them to explore the waters of their own interior. Engagement with the self is one of the key demands of the woman’s moment” (ibid).

Theweleit advocates non-oppressive love, a manifesto that he often conveys by cannily selecting his illustrations for the books. These are sometimes comic strips which he does not comment on directly in the text, but which push a peripheral point he wishes to make in a particular direction. Perhaps the best example of this lies on pages 98-99 of 1989b. Theweleit comments in the text on the Soldier-Male’s need to see himself as whole: “the soldier-male cannot stomach half-measures: the half is below and contaminates. His constant goal is to avoid the experience of fragmentation by fusing himself into a unity in which he remains on top” (98). The first four frames of the comic strip that appears at the top of 98 depict two humans with pig heads trying to engage in sex. The pig heads suggest that, whether the man likes it or not, he is a liminal being, a hybrid of self and abject, carnival other. The man is on top, and there has been no foreplay. This is anything but a loving connection because he is hurting her: “Ouch! damn – watch out, it’s still dry”, she says, “... Do you have to breathe in my face? I Can’t get any air... not so hard!” (ibid). But when the man surrenders his position on top, loving sex commences, and the two lovers connect with one another, kissing passionately, engaging in oral sex, trying different positions. Dryness is replaced by wetness, complaint by “you feel wonderful”... “you too” (99). The male, when he gives up his need to initiate and dominate, enters with her into an equal relationship of mutual pleasure. Although it would be a mistake to generalise this equation between sex and love, this is clearly meant as a metaphor for a loving practice where each partner’s feeling flows into the other, and they both take pleasure from the experience.

For Kristeva, a subject is able to attain health when he or she is open to amorous states, to states of love. In her book *Tales of Love*, she posits this as maturity, to be

reached only once the subject has emerged from the stage of primary narcissism. Ultimately, in the words of John Lechte, this means “being in love involves being the other” (1990, 181), a state of liminality in which identities are merged at the edges. This involves separation from the mother – not the brutal Oedipal separation Freud posits, but a fulfilling entry into a redefined symbolic order. This is fulfilling because the “father”, the law of whom defines the symbolic, should not be the law-wielding, stern being of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, but rather an amalgam of mother-father, a symbolic order which retains those maternal liminal elements (Kristeva 1984b, 41-6).

Ultimately, then, love involves a connection to the liminal, just as the hatred that powers (totalitarian) “fascism” does. Kristeva posits love as resting on a previous narcissism (21-4). It is only through a separation from the mother that we can develop an ego, an identity. But this is a form of narcissism that differs from the pathological versions formed in response to the *corps morcelé*. The liminal space here is left behind, to be sure, but into a symbolic order which still has room for the liminal maternal space of the object (the object representing the mother’s body [1982, 12]). The “father”, an identification with “him” bringing love, provides an ideal which contains abjection and the semiotic, so that love is substantially of the symbolic order, but an open symbolic order that also exhibits “poetic language” and the semiotic elements of mother-identification. In a sense, this is a cracked mirror, one that does not present absolute separation from the mother as an ideal in the way that Lacan’s mirror does. An identity formed from this ideal would thus have a more easy relationship with objects outside the self, because the self is partly already other and outside the self. Love, then, places the ego in a position to become entangled with others, instead of radically rejecting them.

Kristeva thus posits the possibility of the psyche as an “open system”, powered by love. Lechte says:

To illustrate the notion of ‘open system’, Kristeva suggests that rather than thinking of the outside as a threat, or perhaps analogous to ‘noise’ in information theory, we should see it as a stimulus to change and adaptation. The ‘outside’ as a perturbation then becomes an ‘event’ in the life of the subject, broadening horizons and creating psychic space. Resistance to this event leads to an atrophying of psychic space and thus of love. On the other hand, when a perturbation is absorbed by the psychic system and does not remain a threatening

trauma, the psyche becomes increasingly more complex. The more complex and more supple it becomes, the more adept it is at coping with difference – with the other as difference. Now, the other ceases to be a threat and becomes, in his or her very individuality, a participant in my identity. This process, Kristeva also calls love:

We... know the mechanisms of this transfer which makes the human psyche an *open system* capable of self-organisation on condition of maintaining a kind of link with an other: these are the *identification* of primary narcissism ‘revealing’ the subject, and an *idealisation of the word* of the other. I have called this the amorous state (Lechte 183-4; Kristeva 1984b, 5).

This gives a liminal space the chance to afford a kind of permanent openness, one that never gives in to the paranoia of Lacanian narcissism. The anti-(totalitarian) “fascist” potential of this is obvious: the love the cartoons live for in *Roger Rabbit* resists totality at every turn, and, liminal (border) beings that they are, they resist it on the same plain of interpellation that allows totality to form in the first place. So, just as Kristeva’s analysis of Narcissus and *Romeo and Juliet* shows love growing from narcissism and hatred (220-5), so it does in *Roger Rabbit*. This reinforces the postmodern sense of one thing and its other at once that defines both the cartoon/not of the “cured” Eddie Valiant and Roger himself. Both are open systems, compared to the closed-off violence of human-never-toon law-giver, Doom.

The notion of closure is an important one to keep in mind here. Buck-Morss prefaces her reconsideration of Benjamin with a long detour, but a justifiable one. This detour has to do with the original meaning of the word aesthetics, which was a word to be used when speaking about sensual experience, rather than cultural forms, although obviously the two are related. In order to regain a sense of how perception relates to Benjamin’s pronouncements on fascism, Buck-Morss points out the sense system is not actually contained within the body’s limits, but start and end in the world, both as stimulus and as action, or motor response (Buck-Morss, 12). This is very important when we consider that fanatical fascists have a tendency to close the body off from the world, and to try to become as autonomous as possible. To do this, they have to armour themselves. In Theweleit, this armour is the ego, a proposition that Buck Morss agrees with in regards to the normally functioning synaesthetic system, which is thus centred not inside the body but “on the body’s surface” (13, n39), which means that “subjectivity, far

from bounded within the biological body, plays the role of mediator between inner and outer sensations, the images of perception and those of memory. For this reason, Freud situated consciousness on the surface of the body, decentered from the brain..." (13, n39). Theweleit agrees with Buck-Morss in this regard. Theweleit's proto-fascists never reach the Oedipal stage – they remain "psychotic children" (1989b, 211-25), psychologically speaking, so that Freudian psychology is of little use in understanding them. Both the Oedipal and pre-Oedipal stages have liminal moments. Rather than suggesting that they should attain the patriarchal compromises of the Oedipus-as-normalisation-process, I am suggesting instead that liminality be utilised in the interests of open systems, laughter, and political transgression, so that these things are acts of love. The very stage (totalitarian) "fascists" are kept at to produce (totalitarian) "fascism" might also contain resistances to these things. I have suggested that liminal moments also produce love, laughter and democracy, all of these things open and pluralising rather than producing closure and homogenisation. So, Buck-Morss claims, "This synaesthetic system is 'open' in the extreme sense. Not only is it open to the world through sensory organs, but the nerve cells within the body form a network that is in itself discontinuous. They reach out towards other nerve cells at points called synapses, where electrical charges pass through the space between them. Whereas in blood vessels a leak is lamentable, in the networks between nerve bundles, everything 'leaks'" (13). Fascism is posited as the denial of these leaks, similar to the damming of the flows of desire within the armoured body that Theweleit describes.

The ideology of the armoured body without senses has origins in the eighteenth century, when Kant rejected senses as a tool for aesthetic judgement in his second and third critiques of judgement. This was primarily a reaction to Romanticism and its "prevailing sentimentality" (9): "Kant's transcendental subject purges himself of the senses which endanger autonomy not only because they unavoidably entangle him in the world, but, specifically, because they make him passive... instead of active..., susceptible, like 'Oriental voluptuaries' to sympathy and tears" (9). Hence the German philosophical tradition, which advocated totality and closure as ideals, worked to distance people from empathic connection to the other. This ideology gained philosophical ground throughout the nineteenth century, and became mainstream in this century.

Such an advance coincides with the advances of industrialism in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, and the consequent dangers to people's perceptive apparatuses that Buck-Morss later documents. What was once the radically open system of the sense apparatus was progressively closed down by being numbed, and this was largely because of the widespread shock effects that this industrial culture introduces to the human brain, which for thousands of years had only relatively "natural" dangers to worry about. (Totalitarian) "fascism" represents an end point to this closure, its utility and its enforcement, forming the alternative "unreal" "reality" which a (totalitarian) "fascist" environment needs in order to form itself.

In Kristeva love does not decide between the forces of form, the symbolic order, and forces of breakdown, the semiotic. It sits at a permanent tension between the two things, never entirely privileging one nor the other (see Lechte, 170). As such, it occupies that middle ground upon which the liminal is located. So, as (totalitarian) "fascism" springs from narcissism, so does love. This suggests that for (totalitarian) "fascism's" defeat, it must be necessary to traverse the risky ground of its inception. We can all be read as cartoons if we have an ego, just as we, even if we are a proto-fascist soldier, have a lower bodily stratum. The (totalitarian) "fascist" denies this cartoon/object interior's right to exist, though, whereas the cartoon of love embraces it as being a part of, although in some ways necessarily separate from, the self. As we have noted already, the semiotic occupies a liminal space, a space previous to narcissism. A process, such as the one Kristeva outlines here, and as with Victor Turner, the liminal is a mediating stage between two states. Here the maternal phase gives over to a paternal/symbolic state that includes the maternal and opens the subject to the maternal other. In (totalitarian) "fascism", the (maternal) liminal gives way to a state of absolute paternal masculinity, which denies that it also includes the liminal maternal, of which it is (totalitarian) "fascism's" ultimate aim to close down and eliminate. In (totalitarian) "fascism", the abject maternal other's place is thus to facilitate the destruction of itself, of women, all mothers, and all others. Women's place is to breed sons for the master race, a race of narcissists without love that would prefer to bypass even that function and deny women a place in society altogether.

## Laughter

Kristeva describes the act of laughing as an incidence of “practice” which helps to produce an open psychological system:

The practice of the text is a kind of laughter whose only explosions are those of language. The pleasure obtained from the lifting of inhibitions is immediately invested in the production of the new. Every practice which produces something new (a new device) is a practice of laughter: it obeys laughter’s logic and provides the subject with laughter’s advantages. When practice is not laughter, there is nothing new; where there is nothing new, practice cannot be provoking: it is at best a repeated, empty act. (1984a, 225)

Practice, for Kristeva, connects the subject with the object, the other. As John Lechte argues, it is “not simply reducible to self-conscious action (in which case it would follow the predictable path mapped out by the symbolic)” (139), and so “it is also a key moment in putting the subject in process” (139). Laughter requires being caught and surprised by an object, and as such involves a transgression. Roger Rabbit cannot transgress his boundaries unless it is funny to do so, unless it provokes laughter, and so unless he “becomes” in a sense laughter, or practice. Laughter allows him to overcome the imprisoning symbolic law, under which he is, for a time, handcuffed to Eddie, and to create something new, a new subject, and one who has transgressed a physical law. Laughter is produced at the point of these transgressions in the film: the transgression of the human and the cartoon worlds – reality and abject representations – upon one another. Jessica Rabbit says, “I’m not bad, I’m just drawn that way”. A Liminal Process Favouring Totality produces nothing new; it produces a reinforcement of the old. It is the “repeated, empty act” *par excellence*.

Luce Irigaray also sees laughter as a freeing practice. “Isn’t laughter the first form of liberation from a secular oppression?” she asks; “Isn’t the phallic tantamount to seriousness of meaning? Perhaps woman, and the sexual relation, transcend it ‘first’ in laughter?” (1985, 163). Here, as elsewhere, the phallus represents the seriousness of closure and of defence against the other that can threaten closure. Laughter, and its partner in crime, the category of “the funny”, (opposed to seriousness), leads to the

transgression, the transcendence, even, of the serious phallic (masculine) construct, in the name of its other, the feminine. Bakhtinian carnival laughter is also the laughter of transgression – the transgression by the underclass against the authority of the overlords. *Less Than Zero* suggests obliquely that the revival of the carnival is a key to overcoming the distancing, mediated world its characters exist in (*Less Than Zero*, 207). For Bakhtin, a major political feature of carnival is there are “no footlights”, and so no separation between performer and performed, self and other, something desperately desired by *Less Than Zero*’s characters, who are all “afraid to merge” (9). In their world of “repeated, empty acts”, “something new” has the potential to produce what is radically other to the text and therefore absolutely central: feeling, a love which connects subject to object. This, surely, applies doubly to the “repeated, empty acts” of Patrick Bateman.

Kathleen Rowe, in her book *The Unruly Woman*, suggests that this transgressive moment is liminal, and is therefore privileged in its association with the feminine. She posits the potential of ambivalent laughter in the figure of “the unruly woman”, a figure that can be found in the person of the laughing hags that Bakhtin finds in Rabelais’ novel, and in the Medusa figure in Hélène Cixous’s essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”. In it, Cixous suggests that laughter can “shatter the framework of institutions... blow up the law... break up the ‘truth’” (1976, 888). Women can, Rowe claims, cut through the power of the male spectacle by making a spectacle “of” themselves: “women might begin to re-weave the web of visual power that already binds them by taking the unruly woman as a model-woman as rule-breaker, joke-maker, and public, bodily spectacle.... In acts of spectatorial unruliness, I believe, [women] might examine models of *returning* the male gaze, exposing and making a spectacle of the gazer, claiming the pleasure and power of making spectacles of ourselves, and beginning to negate our own invisibility in the public sphere” (1995, 12). Hence, in her reading of the film *A Question of Silence*, Rowe traces the feminist “re-education” of a privileged female lawyer by three working-class female clients accused of murdering a sexist male shopkeeper. Rowe suggests that this awakening is only complete “when she finally ‘gets’ it”, when she laughs at her understanding, at last, “that understanding patriarchy means understanding a monumental joke” (16). The desire behind this, for Rowe, is to imagine “a social world in which laughter occurs less often to ‘break apart’, as Cixous describes, than to bring together”



(21).

The cartoon seems to function as a carnivalesque totem in just this way. The cartoon is nothing if not unruly laughter and nothing if not a performative spectacle made out of itself. Moreover, Rowe's suggestion that the unruly woman can "expos[e] and make a spectacle of the gazer" (12), applies to the (totalitarian) "fascist" gaze, the masculinist gaze that consigns women to "other" status, and associates her with the liminal, the marginal, pulp, and all the other categories that are threatening to masculinity. As we have seen, this masculinity can be read as a cartoon, but one which cannot accept its cartoon elements, because cartoons are also culturally feminised and othered. This is the case in a very similar way to the realisation that patriarchy is a "monumental joke". Exposure of the masculinist gaze as cartoonish itself, rather than truth-seeing, undoes its power and renders it liminal; it is a practice which can place the victims of this power in process. If the masculinist gazer can laugh at the spectacle he has become, he will be put into process (made incomplete) as well, because he would have accepted the cartoon in himself. If he doesn't laugh, a Liminal Process Favouring Totality will almost certainly ensure the shoring-up of his defences (and, like Patrick Bateman, he will become even more cartoon-like as he becomes more dangerous). But the more people laugh at a masculinist-spectacle-as-monumental-joke, as a monstrous joke (Rowe, 7), the less universal (totalitarian) "fascist" power will be. Arendt noted that once the totalitarian construct of society (its "reality") was lifted with the capitulation of the Nazi Government, the German people were very quickly "cured" of their totalitarian instincts (364).

Rowe suggests that for women to create a carnivalesque space of their own, they must be prepared to risk offending, and risk ridicule being brought upon themselves. Here they would offend the (totalitarian) "fascist" by exposing for all to see the fact that he is a cartoon, tantamount to them uncovering publicly the lower-bodily chaos that he has frozen within him. Their laughter will seem to him like a bodily flood, and he will associate it with filth, with "down there". He will find himself not on top but "at the bottom", the butt (of the joke), the place he fears the most. This carries with it an enormous risk, as his denial of the spectacle he has become may well form a violent backlash, a "reaction-formation". But at the very least the laughing subjects-in-process

that offend him will be in connection with their own cartoon others, and so are not themselves denying they are partially (carnavalesque) cartoons. In women's case, historically, such denial takes the shape of silence, for men, violence. They instead, as Irigaray says, liberate themselves from secular (phallic) oppression (Irigaray, op.cit).

## Chapter ten

### The Democratic Toon

#### A “single co-ordinate”

Having discussed at some length the politics of “cartoons”, I want to now turn to constructing the possibility of a “cartoon” politics, a politics able to side-step Liminal Processes Favouring Totality. Pynchon shows how this might work at various points in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Vineland*. Many of the characters in Pynchon’s narrative who resist “the Firm’s” power revel in abject substances and ideas that They find uncomfortable, while on the most personal level, a resistance to the system the Counterforce members individually indulge in is the offer of small kindnesses – an initial reaching out to the other.

Pynchon’s novel has often been read in pessimistic lights in regard to actions to take in response to Them (the Firm) and to total control. Pynchon would seem to be ready to warn his readers about the dangers of totality, but offers us very little by way of how to remove the rocket suspended over all our heads. It is one thing to recognise that total structures are “structures favouring death” and therefore need to be resisted, quite another to fight the might of a totalitarian system of the sort They have imposed. This is especially so as the most obvious method by which to fight, from outside the system, has been shown as, at best, easily defeated and at worst ultimately an extension of (totalitarian) “fascism” itself. All these are what appear to be modest resistances: as Kathryn Hume intimates, Pynchon’s direct solutions to the problem of Their total power all seem to operate at local levels, and hence are easily tamed by the totality (Hume, 1992, 251). She points to the “abject” disruption of “Their” dinner party by Pig Bodine and Roger Mexico, substituting witty profanities for menu items: “snot stew”, “Pus pudding”, and so on, which has the representatives of the elect gagging into Their napkins (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 713-17)<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Quite obviously, various passages in *American Psycho* partake in the abject and the carnivalesque as well, and just as obviously, from a reading of the book’s history, the same arguments of carnivalesque impulses supporting revolutionary impulses or providing a safety valve for the prevailing system, as discussed in Ames (1990) can be made. For a discussion of *American Psycho* and the carnivalesque, see Price (1998).

For Julia Kristeva, the abject comprises those things which disgust us. It often forms, for products of Western values, from bodily substances and waste products—excrement, decomposing food or a dead body are examples (1982, 2-3). Contact with abject substances causes a physical reaction, a gag or a violent turning away of the head (ibid); this type of reaction is usually reserved for the “lowest of the low”. An individual’s own unique store of abject things can be identified in this way. Kristeva explains that we react this way because abjections occupy a space of absolute otherness to ourselves (2). Abject states exist liminally, because they are hybrids of two discrete states. Organic wastes from our own bodies, for instance, imply life and life processes, but yet are dead matter, and so are contained and excluded. The subject reacts physically to the sight and smell of their own body wastes because they suggest the presence of a death emanating from the uncontrollable regions inside and below (2-3). This places the subject in a state of narcissistic crisis (14). Theweleit suggests that the more fascist a culture is the less it can assimilate this sort of reality into its totality. Such things necessitate containment because they represent a chaotic hybrid state – a liminal state in which life merges with its other, and not cleanly like violent, mechanical death in the heat of battle, but through disintegration and infection. The soldiers of the *Freikorps*, for instance, construct their victims as abject wastes – floods, pulps, ooze – before exploding into violent action against them (see 1989a, 385-408). Because of the absolute nature of (totalitarian) “fascist” being, anything not considered part of the self or its extensions (such as the regiment or the nation) forms an abjection, where in Kristeva, the abject is an absolute otherness, a whole scale of intermediary others failing to provoke horror in us.

I discussed the abject fantasy of the giant adenoid in Chapter four; we saw how this abjection was associated with “a new preterition” (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 15). Later in the novel Pynchon introduces the satiric image of the “Toiletship”, the ultimate in compartmentalisation and containment (448-51). This vessel represents “rationalism’s” response to the human body, not only to control and contain waste, but also to isolate it from the body of the nation. Instead it is taken out to sea, associating the masculinist/rationalist’s fear of its own interior with the “feminine” by way of male culture’s greatest feminine symbol. The rational nature of this containment is complete with hierarchical waste control systems according to the status of the user. This

confirms, despite its grandeur, Their vulnerability to the existence of wastes. Thus the Toiletship allows Their culture to exclude and “pass over” a part of itself it denies. By doing this, the ship makes the elect’s link between abject waste and the preterite for us.

So, Bodine and Mexico’s attack is well aimed. After the dinner, They have been temporarily defeated, hit where they hurt, so to speak. They are reeling, their vulnerability to such tactics exposed. But Their official history is likely to “pass over” the incident, so that it will be seen as an aberration if at all, courting reprisals and even perhaps eventually leading to an extension to Their power. Christopher Ames finds limited hope, though, in the barely detectable smile of the Preterite butler as he assists Mexico and Bodine’s escape (1990, 205). This is because it links the Counterforce with the preterite in terms of aims and aspirations, and makes the preterite seem like a potentially revolutionary class. Earlier in the novel Pynchon deliberately linked abject substances and the preterite. The “Negro shit”, in the toilet Slothrop descends into during his racially-anxious sewer-journey episode, is linked to revolutionary action through the presence of Malcolm X (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 63). Shit is seen as the presence of death, and it is also “the colour the white folks [Slothrop definitely included] are afraid of” (688), (another way They have planted Their system in his brain). Ames suggests that in *Gravity’s Rainbow* the “obscene utterance has become the purified language of the Preterite” (191), so that the abject becomes revolutionary in potential. The words “fuck you” (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 203) are a spell, and death can be told to “fuck off” (10; Ames, 191). The novel also has many references to pigs, a privileged site of bodily ambivalence related to the carnivalesque (see Stallybrass and White, 44-59). This therefore associates many episodes with the carnival’s emphasis on lower bodily strata. It seems that the elect find the abject difficult to face, because it represents the feminine body that fascist technology is geared to transcend.

But Pynchon appears to question the ultimate usefulness of this for genuine political action: after all, the Counterforce appears to fail in its aims, eventually pulled into the mainstream just as was the revolutionary culture of the 1960s in *Vineland*. Ames notes how Stallybrass and White critique Bakhtin’s political claims for the carnival, agreeing that it could equally have been organised (licensed or at least tolerated) by the ruling elite as a way for the villagers to let off steam, thus disarming revolutionary

fervour (Ames 203; Stallybrass and White, 13-14). He also notes that “rule breaking has become (quoting Allon White) ‘fetishised on the left as an intrinsically radical essence’, and on the right described as ‘mere licensed release’” (Ames, 203; White 1982, 60), so that the presence of the object may not necessarily be subversive. This is demonstrated by Theweleit, when he discovers that the soldier attains a forbidden hybrid state as he kills, and this state, and the release it provides, allows him to maintain his martial libidinal organisation (1989b, 177-8). Hume notes, in addition, that “concerted effort is not [possible] because that would involve hierarchy and control” (251), so that according to the terms *Gravity’s Rainbow* sets up, any revolution would simply reinscribe, ultimately, the old paradigms, only in a new arrangement. Thus the dominance of power itself, the possibility of “ideology”, replicates itself and ensures its own survival. She concludes that in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “We can only abjure control and extend ourselves to do small kindnesses” (251), do what we can within the confines of a totalitarian structure.

This is what Slothrop does when he mistakes a preterite woman in the ruins for a mythical figment of Greta Erdmann’s paranoia. He realises that by identifying her as someone he would have “passed over” (458) in his search for people connected to the Zone’s central myth, the Rocket, he has become a little like Them. His attempts to structure his environment according to the privileged truth of his own quest creates a situation where some figures are important to him and others are to be ignored. He responds by giving her “a long stub he’s been saving” (459), a sacrifice which recognises her identification with him, not only her “otherness” to him. Thus, he hopes, his act of kindness will help undermine the Zone’s regression toward hierarchy. Slothrop is generally a kind person – he is easily exploited because he is willing to do things for others with very little reward for himself. He delivers a message for Squalidozzi, he rescues the hashish for Bodine. Although he receives things in return for these tasks, he does not insist upon materially exact trade. When Saure Bummer admits to Slothrop that he wouldn’t get the money that had been promised to him, he is astonished to find Slothrop doesn’t particularly mind, Rocketman being “above all that shit” (438). In a key character-development episode early in the novel, Slothrop rescues a little girl from the rubble of a V2 strike, her request for “any gum, chum?” (24) touching him deeply.

These kindnesses are common among the Counterforce: “Leni, Franz, Pirate, Roger, Slothrop, Katje, Geli, Pig and Bianca all offer kindness, gestures meant to help someone”, says Hume (1992, 251). When Katje first learns of the emergence of the Counterforce, she describes it as “a prophecy. A Kindness” (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 535). Initially, Hume, who is writing about Pynchon’s retreat from realistic characterisation, makes the suggestion that character is reduced in the novel because in its large systems, arbitrary in nature, turn life into a game. When life is a game – Their game, specifically – people are treated as objects, pawns. “As an agent, Katje learns that Jews are as negotiable as candy bars or sex, and that their lives have a departmental value equal to set quantities of information” (250). Tchitcherine muses on the convertibility between human pain and goals and is rendered uneasy by the Marxist vision of history when Wimpe explains how this vision makes him and everyone expendable to the greater aim, as in chess (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, 701, Hume, 250). Also, “Slothrop sees how people are being used as counters in a game when small honesties or kindnesses from Tantivy and Sir Stephen get them silently removed from his purview” (ibid), Hume writes. “Pirate and Roger revolt at the way Slothrop is being used as a thing. Leni and Franz both rebel against being used as if their human feelings and concerns were of no account. In contrast, Pointsman and Weissmann both use their subordinates as pawns” (ibid).

This, according to Hume, justifies Pynchon’s retreat from character, because it focuses his concern onto humanity generally (252). The isolated acts of kindness act against Their game, as Hume says: “The willingness to give something without expectation of a return is a move meaningless within a game and hence it puts one outside game-board relations with others” (251). However, once again the problem of finding an “outside” to a (totalitarian) “fascist” structure, in order to oppose it, asserts itself. Once kindness becomes a category, it re-enters the game.

The strength of poststructuralist-based democratic theory of the sort Laclau and Mouffe develop is that opposition can legitimately come from within the system and be complicit in it at the same time as opposing it. But Pynchon’s retreat from character, for instance, necessitates his denial of the illusion of a character’s autonomy – in some ways he is as guilty of manipulating his characters from a position of absolute power as They are. Although it may be reasonable to assume Pynchon’s benevolence, his focus on an

aggregate “humanity” also gives his position structurally unlimited powers. At least realism set limits on the author, whereas Pynchon’s method has the potential to be omnipotent as well as omniscient. The author’s aping of (totalitarian) “fascist” structure in his novel opens out concerns about the continuing dominance of Liminal Processes Favouring Totality on the postmodern discourse-scape.

There are at least two successful resistances favouring democracy in *Vineland*, both of them enveloped in popular culture. The first of these is by that commune of restless spirits the Thanatoids. They are both dead and alive, as their name (which shouldn’t be taken nearly as seriously as I’m about to take it here) suggests. Thanatos, of course, is the Greek deity of death that dominates *Gravity’s Rainbow*, while the suffix “oid” has connotations of “being”. In the novel the name is described as meaning “like death, only different” (*Vineland*, 170). Hence they occupy middle ground between the two extremes, neither fully alive nor fully dead, but in a different state, both alive and dead. This can have negative consequences: the Thanatoids we meet tend to have been killed unjustly-many of them in Vietnam, although Weed Atman is also a Thanatoid – and so for them death dominates. Their mission is to right the “karmic imbalance” (caused by the injustice of their deaths) that is preventing them fully attaining the state of death. They are like many people in the novel who have been “captured” by The Tube, and Thanatoid life is the life of the couch potato. They never sleep (it is too much like real death); instead they just watch. In this they can be compared to the 24fps, whose pure spectatorship opens the door to a fascist influence in their work. Certainly, while Thanatoids desire “completion”, they remain passive.

But they are not wholly victims. For one thing, they are aware of their lessened status, which involves awkwardness, being accident-prone, and being permanently short of money. Although they don’t appreciate being reminded that they are technically dead, it is because they are not, actually, dead at all. This difference is important (and has confused any number of perfectly respectable Pynchon readers who, like N. Kathleen Hayles, assume that Weed Atman’s reappearance at Thanatoid Village in the 1980s means he was actually only wounded by Rex, rather than murdered [1994, 26]). The Thanatoids understand that there are degrees of existence between the two polarities of life and death, and that they occupy some of this space. Although more like the Derridian



categories of *spectre* or *trace* than toons *per se*, they nonetheless occupy the same “excluded middle” terrain as toons, and they are linked to cartoons in two significant ways. The first is in their relationship to laughter – Thanatoids are notorious for telling jokes on themselves, surprising since “enjoyment” is not exactly their long suit: “What do you call a Thanatoid with ‘Sir’ in front of his name? Knight of the living dead...” (219). These jokes, as you can see, often have to do with Thanatoids’ existential predicament. As such, they indulge in the “practice” of laughter.

Second is the way the Thanatoids become politically activated. In one of Pynchon’s mythical and most hopeful episodes, towards the end of the novel, the Thanatoids suddenly eschew their nightly TV vigil and actually fall asleep instead. This break in routine coincides with the commune’s tenth anniversary celebrations, a fact that links it in with a local Yoruk myth of the path to the land of the dead being closed for ten years. This story is told to Brock Vond by the “legally ambiguous” (44) tow truck team of Blood and Vato at the novel’s climax, as they escort the FBI man to his death. In the morning, the Thanatoids wake up, existentially:

In fact, out of a long memory of strange dawns, this morning in the Shade Creek-Thanatoid Village area would stand forth as an exception. Not only had the entire population actually slept the night before, but they were also now awakening, in reply to a piping, chiming music, synchronized, coming out of wristwatches, timers, and personal computers, engraved long ago, as if for this moment, on sound chips dumped once in an obscure skirmish of the silicon market wars, expedited in fact by Takeshi Fumimota, as part of a settlement with the ever-questionable trading company of Tokkata & Fuji, all playing together now, and in four-part harmony, the opening of J.S. Bach’s “Wachet Auf.” And not the usual electronic stuff – this had soul, a quantity these troubled folks could recognize. They blinked, they began to turn, their eyes, often for the first time, sought contact with the eyes of other Thanatoids. This was unprecedented. This was like a class-action lawsuit suddenly resolved after generations in the courts. Who remembered? Say, who didn’t? What was a Thanatoid, at the end of the long dread day, but memory? So, to one of the best tunes ever to come out of Europe, even with its timing adapted to the rigors of a disco percussion track able to make the bluest Thanatoid believe, however briefly, in resurrection, they woke, the Thanatoids woke. (324-5)

It is as if they, guided here by a reduction in form that exists in its own right and without anxiety (the music in a kitsch form) awake to the life in their death, instead of seeing only

the death in their life. In this they are like the sacrilegious Bach which has “soul” nonetheless. This, of course, recalls the many characters seemingly still very much alive on “the other side” in *Gravity’s Rainbow* including some, such as Brigadier Pudding, who work from there for the Counterforce. And this awakening is brought into relief as potentially anti-(totalitarian) “fascist” because it coincides with the victory over Brock, however minor or inconsequential it is. The Thanatoids stand outside official control themselves, and hence their commune is potentially subversive. It has a reason to be, too: the Thanatoids tend to have been murdered by or because of illegal government activities. Being officially dead – having accepted the death in themselves, albeit without a choice – they are no longer citizens, and so are more of an independent People’s Republic than PR<sup>3</sup>. They are committed to their community, a “hard-core”, similar to the “for real” members of the counterculture Vond’s chauffeur Roscoe identifies (270). And now they have woken up, they have also freed themselves of cultural control by the governing authorities. Their victory is a victory of engagement with the other: life engages with death; they themselves engage with an indigenous legend. The possibility that we are partially constituted by the other is entertained by them and accepted. This may represent a reduction in autonomy and form, but it reintroduces, through the reduction of the absolute, “soul”, the force of humanity.

Sometimes cartoons have “soul”, and, like most Thanatoids, sometimes they are kind too. As with the examples of kindnesses to others Katherine Hume describes in *Gravity’s Rainbow* Thanatoids tend, to use the words of *V.*’s McLintoc Sphere, to “keep cool, but care” (*V.*, 366). This is a phrase Tony Tanner complains is “speech-bubble talk” (1971, 161), and hence not of much use as an ethics in the real world. But *Vineland*’s most resistant, and along with Prairie, its most likeable character, the mature DL Chastain, shows that cartoons can act politically, and with impact. DL is the novel’s resident comic Ninjette and another Thanatoid collaborator. As Stacey Olster points out, she is defined very deliberately in terms of her reality. She is introduced to us as a “live solid woman” (*Vineland*, 99) when Prairie first sets eyes on her, “athletic” (*ibid*). She “belongs to herself” (128), and thus represents autonomy; she is “reclaiming her body” (*ibid*), presumably from incursions of the inanimate, represented here for Olster by the Bionic Woman “whom Pynchon cites twice” (Olster 1994, 130). She resists “handing

[her body] over to those who are more qualified, doctors and lab technicians and by extension coaches, employers, boys with hardons, so forth... they think people are easier to control that way" (*Vineland*, 128). She is not a person one should attempt to deceive or manipulate, as she is known occasionally to harass entire motorcycle gangs on her own.

This strength comes from her childhood, the descriptions of her dysfunctional and violent family being presented in realist mode, a tragic series of episodes that contribute to the complexity of her character. But this "real" strength also has a cartoon side, and its expression tends toward the cartoonish: her placing in "the dangerous Teen Miss pageant in '63" (139), the interview in *Soldier of Fortune*, the "centrefold in *Aggro World*" (139), her vocation as a Ninjette, with all its cartoonish techniques and lore which are comic parodies of Hollywood Ninja culture. Moreover, as we have seen, Pynchon constantly describes DL in terms of cartoons. She is presented precisely as both a cartoon and as indisputably real, just as the preterite is in *Gravity's Rainbow*. And she incorporates these two aspects of herself into a thoroughly sympathetic and likeable character, and, as Olster makes clear, more subversive than the "radical" 24fps film collective. Unlike many of her friends, DL is never "turned". This incorporation of apparent opposites comes not in the form of some dialectical synthesis but rather as an acknowledgement that she is a real person whose reality includes her relationship with the cartoonish way she is represented and represents herself. She shows no terror at either her corporeality and sexuality or the inanimate cartoon in her. She is firmly in control of her sexuality, as is exemplified by her denial of Takeshi's sexual interest until he earns her love. But this fact does not represent any reluctance in DL to be a sexual woman either. For instance, she has a love affair with Frenesi, and hence felt Frenesi's betrayal as keenly as anyone else in the novel. As Olster suggests, this mixture comes out politically as a healthy impurity, meaning that DL can engage in an effective kind of "impure guerrilla warfare" which stems from "an active involvement in the real" (Olster, 131-2), this corresponding with the sort of engagement Pynchon himself would seem to favour.

This seems to point towards a workable "We-system", one that doesn't subsume difference while it makes connections. Unlike the universalised "we" of *Gravity's Rainbow*, which is justified as a grand gesture, but needs breaking down and

deconstructing, taking difference into account, before it can become a program, this “we” suggests alliances for specific political purposes that do not subsume the whole identity and hence become universalising grand systems. For instance, Takeshi and DL’s partnership is always up for renegotiation, and while it usually just “rolls over” for another year, it is never suggested this is inflexible: the latest renewal dropped DL’s “no sex” clause (*Vineland*, 381). DL, too, was a member of 24fps without being taken in by its essentialist rhetoric, because she thought it could *achieve* something. Some of the most subversive groups in the book, for instance Sister Rochelle’s Ninjette retreats, operate in non-(totalitarian) “fascist” ways that don’t simply try to exist outside the dominant system. They are quite happy to be anti-corporate and anti-control but to still operate on small scale commercial footings; in their retreat they will harbour people in trouble, but still expect them to pay their way, if not in money, then preferably with work, something which Prairie is happy enough to do.

### Overcoming polarisation in theory

The question remains, however, how “healthy impurity” in the resistance can overcome the fear its presence might provoke. If we remember, *Liminal Processes Favouring Totality* appear in response to a threat of fragmentation. Susan Buck-Morss’s argument is that societies that resemble fascist ones operate by producing narcissistic subjects. These people are made to feel a reliance on whole, complete forms in response to cultural and personal flux and fragmentation, a fragmentation suggesting pain to the subject (the shock of which anaesthetises him or her). This retroactivates the *corps morcelé*, the fantasy of the body in pieces theorised by Lacan. *Liminal Processes Favouring Totality* operate on the desire to avoid the fragmentation suggested by the *corps morcelé*. The narcissistic personality looks for literal and figurative mirrors in which to confirm their wholeness, because everything they encounter threatens the tenuous ground this self-image is built upon. When they find such a “mirror” they can retroactivate the pleasant feeling they expressed in their early episodes of narcissism in the mirror stage. The figurative mirrors envelop the cultural assumptions they have internalised: in the face of what they see as a dangerously fragmented social economy

they respond by appealing to corrective wholenesses – they are careful to maintain physical wholeness and support political and social systems of wholeness.

Once again we arrive at the impasse of writing political postmodernism. Totalistic wholeness, related to fascism, narcissism and totalitarianism, are the target of both these writers. Pynchon and Ellis partly respond by privileging their opposites: fragmentation, incompleteness, impurity, and so on. But the original engine for (totalitarian) “fascism” is that fragmentation and flux is produced by the very systems that Pynchon and Ellis target. This surface flux, ascribed to the doings of the “other”, is used to engineer the Liminal Processes Favouring Totality the system needs to replicate a deeper wholeness, the hegemony of capital and the concurrent advancement of the interests of the “elect”. Simply recreating the conditions of flux that media-driven capitalism produces will not necessarily resist it, even if fragmentation itself in the base structure (as opposed to the superstructural *appearance* of fragmentation that comes with postmodern culture) is anathematic to that system. On the contrary: the structural recreation of fragmentation the texts indulge in may very well simply become another cultural product contributing to Liminal Processes Favouring Totality, the anaesthetising of the population, and therefore the strengthening of the system<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> Related to this is the question of the political use of a fragmented discourse when it faces the powerful discourses of a totalitarianism. This argument is outlined in Chapter two. The wave of neo-conservative Marxist thinkers that form around Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, Teresa Ebert and the occasional journal *Transformation* reject Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualisation of radical democracy on these grounds. Robert Albritton, for instance, characterises their anti-essentialism as an impossible and tenuous flux: “the tendency of their ontology is to make reality so fleeting that any effort to understand it in ways that would enable us to transform it rationally would seem to border on the impossible... their framework offers them no purchase at all on theorising the economic under capitalism” (Albritton, 1995, 79). Albritton therefore chides them for “a peculiar falling back into essentialism” (ibid) for constructing a structure for political alliances. Similarly, and predictably, they are attacked for de-centring class struggle. The identity politics that form groups other than the economically-derived category of class (Laclau and Mouffe also deconstruct the centrality of economics, because it is the central place of economics which makes being a member of the working class the essential locus for political action) is regarded as too weak, rejecting, as Paul LeBlanc puts it, “the basis for a compellingly revolutionary programme” (1995, 297). Zavarzadeh, for instance, states that any poststructuralist theory dismantles the very idea of totality, the only theoretical concept that can conceive of capitalism as a “totality” (1995, 2-3).

This discourse itself falls prey to a Liminal Process Favouring Totality. Faced with the possibility of fragmentation, it responds by insisting upon its own survival, intact, as a totality. As such, its targets are not untypical of masculinist totalities: in attempting the liberation of society's exploited, it firstly insists upon subsuming all of these under one privileged umbrella (the working-class) and denying the legitimacy of groups such as feminists (of many different types), race-based groups, and gay groups. Thus the structure of the totality above/the fragmented, weak, and illegitimate mass floundering below is replicated. The *Transformation* group exhibit a general denial of the legitimacy of the other within; issues such as racial prejudice, gay liberation and the oppression of women will become resolved once the capitalist

The difference this time is that now we are ready to confront this impasse with the “cartoon”. To the extent that the processes of totalisation themselves need to be overcome, the difference between (totalitarian) “fascism” and radical democracy can be likened to that between the abnegatory and the accepting cartoon. The (totalitarian) “fascist” form is cartoonish in that it suppresses differences and internal others to a degree that it “represents” itself in a way that denies the complexity of its own “body” (politic). Thus it denies its applicability to the “reality” of existence, presenting a forcibly unified “front-line” of itself. In this way, a (totalitarian) “fascist” politics is not “whole”. Although it seeks to enact closure, and establish its identity once and for all, it never can, because it does not recognise the “floods” of its diverse interior. Instead that interior is sutured over, its “feminine gaps” covered magically, and it becomes an outline with no differentiation in its interior. Radical democracy is a different sort of cartoon. It is a cartoon in the “negative” sense that it represents itself as an incomplete system, a system that does not aim to complete its own “reality” into a totality. It also represents the low and the profane; the mass gaining the power to rule itself.

Laclau and Mouffe’s formulation offers the possibility of a fearless resistance to dominant structures rooted in an understanding of the dangers of essentialism. This is because one structure that may be formed from the fragmented body of the people for a specific purpose is a political alliance, an alliance of hegemonies. This, I believe, also goes some distance to answering the divide-and-conquer critique of postmodernism by the Marxist proponents who advocate a return to materialist determinism and class-based essentialist discourses Laclau and Mouffe advocate abandoning. Although fragmented, the leftist opposition to the (totalitarian) “fascist” mode of control exhibited by hegemonies of corporate interests is not fragmented hopelessly. An alliance between the different groupings for the purpose of defeating a common enemy without suppressing the difference between the alliance’s members (several of which might have common members) may have greater potential for non-(totalitarian) “fascist” politics than an essentialist discourse which pits the self of the proletariat against the other of the

---

ideology withers away, since they are a direct consequence of alienation and ideology. That is not to say all of these issues are of no concern to *Transformation*—the contrary applies. But their goals are all linked to the elevated goal of class revolution. Thus no tolerance is shown to anything that threatens to dissolve the armoured exterior of the movement—such interior antagonisms are “sutured”.

bourgeoisie. This is because, as we have noted, the essentialist discourse opens out the potential; for (totalitarian) “fascist” oppression of the people the political fight is fought for. However, the formation of a resistant hegemony alone does not answer the problem of how to avoid the re-establishment of totality in the event that such a resistance propels a popular, radically democratic revolution, how to prevent it becoming a (totalitarian) “fascist”-type movement itself, at the service of these greater aims. At the threshold of the new political era, a Liminal Process Favouring Totality could usher in the need for the hegemony to establish totality politics so that the old order cannot reassert itself. As Laclau notes, in a fuller version of the quote we encountered in Chapter two,

from the fact that there is the impossibility of ultimate closure and presence, it does not follow that there is an ethical imperative to “cultivate” that openness or even less to be necessarily committed to a democratic society. I think that the latter can certainly be defended from a deconstructivist perspective, but that defence cannot be logically derived from constitutive openness – something more has to be added to the argument. Precisely because of the undecidability inherent in constitutive openness, ethico-political moves different from or even opposite to a democracy “to come” can be made – for instance, since there is ultimate undecidability and, as a result, no immanent tendency of the structure to closure and full presence, closure has to be *artificially* brought about from the outside. In that way a case for totalitarianism can be presented starting from deconstructive premises. Of course, the totalitarian argument would be as much a non sequitur as the argument for democracy: either direction is equally possible given the situation of structural undecidability. (1995, 93)

What democratic movements require to succeed in maintaining themselves as democratic over time is a constant transparency of their internal antagonisms; when closure is artificially brought about, the arbitrariness of that closure needs to be a visible part of the sign of that closure. Totalistic politics attempt to suture over antagonisms and reduce otherness to sameness, hence (totalitarian) “fascists” “cover over” “feminine gaps”. This suturing hides the artificial nature of the act of closure – by covering this up, the act of closure becomes an act of power masked as nature. Democracy, however resembles far more the deconstructive gesture of continually finding the antagonisms of the aporia, the space that cannot be reduced to the totality of the “same-ness” of the text. A “metaphysical” reading of a text attempts to suture over aporias and restore the text to full presence. In the context of a radical democracy, what the deconstructive gesture

requires is nothing short of political labour, and it is labour without end, since the goal is precisely the opposite of the suturing over of antagonisms. Critchley posits democracy as “an ethically grounded form of political life which is continually being called into question by asking of its legitimacy and the legitimacy of its practices and institutions: what is justice? In this sense, legitimate communities are those which have themselves in question; and, to that extent, legitimate communities are philosophical. The political wisdom of democratic societies consists in their service to love, to the irreducibility of ethical difference” (1992, 239). The presence of the very social set-up is under erasure, questioned and contested without end: “*Democracy does not exist*; that is to say, starting from today, and every day, there is a responsibility to invent democracy, to extend the democratic franchise to all areas of public and private life” (240). Democracy does not simply emerge when a deconstructive critique identifies an aporia in the structure of a totality and demonstrates that totality is a construction rather than a reality, impossible to sustain. This can lead to defensive formations, the tyranny of a totality that has no rights to exist and so will destroy rather than risk losing the power it hides. Democracy is impossible too, only this anxiety is absent; indeed it is the reason for its own existence. And democracy has to be made, re-created, not as an ideal but as a tool, a self-reflexive convenience which happens to be very weak but also happens to be a construction allowing people to live with other, different (antagonistic, even), people in relative peace.

Laclau rejects the notion that there is nothing in between absolute, essentialist stability and total flux. “We live as *bricoleurs* in a plural world”, he writes, “having to take decisions within incomplete systems of rules (incompletion here means undecidability)... It is because of this constitutive incompletion that decisions have to be taken, but because we are faced with incompletion and not with total dispossession, the problem of a *total* ethical grounding – either through the opening to the otherness of the other, or through any similar metaphysical principle – never arrives” (1995, 94). This represents a movement away from absolute flux, a flux Pynchon is suspicious of as well (“a condition not many of us can bear for long” [*Gravity's Rainbow*, 434]). The “cartoonness” inherent in the system creates the need for a decision, arbitration: “because of this constitutive incompletion... decisions have to be taken...” (Laclau, 94). This differs from many conceptions of the postmodern, which suggest the continuous



resistance of these decisions and commitment to a position or the moment at which interpretation or politics has to be announced. What is at fault here is the injunction that just because postmodernist critiques of knowledge do indeed suggest that this moment can forever be deferred because the final stand or interpretation is at bottom an arbitrary construction, such a stand is impossible or even undesirable. People have been making them since before anyone thought to write them down.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak understands how the failure of some of her poststructuralist colleagues to make decisions and commit themselves politically and ethically is in fact a failure that can be seen to result from a Liminal Process Favouring Totality (although she does not case it in these terms): “You pick up the universal that will give you the power to fight against the other side, and what you are throwing away by doing that is your theoretical purity. Whereas the great custodians of the anti-universal are obliged therefore simply to act in the interests of a great narrative, the narrative of exploitation, while they keep themselves clean by not committing themselves to anything. In fact they are actually run by a great narrative even as they are busy protecting their theoretical purity by repudiating essentialism” (1990, 12). So, anti-universalists and anti-essentialists must speak in universals and essences or they actually risk reinscribing universalism and essentialism, the oppressive types of discourses they have decided to oppose in the first place. As Rey Chow puts it, they must be “fearless” in regards to speaking the universal, but it must be “a fearlessness that is firmly grounded in an understanding of the dangers of essentialism and metalanguage” (1993, 9).

There is actually no reason, therefore, why a person committed to radical democracy cannot theorise capitalism as a totality in order to understand and fight its current manifestations. Or, theorise it as an incomplete system, a system of hegemonies with a will to power, dedicated to totalising. Deconstructed language is, as Laclau says, an “incomplete set of rules (incompletion here means undecidability)” (op-cit), but as such it is a set of rules, a system which can generate (incomplete) understanding and (incomplete) sense. What this means is that if economics and class are discovered by a political hegemony to be the most effective way to combat the exploitation and oppression of people, then that is the front upon which the fight for democracy should occur. This, though, does not delegitimise the claims of people oppressed in the many

other ways that (totalitarian) “fascist” systems oppress people. And the decision to attack a total system on this front should be premised upon the fact that it is merely a tactical choice of one possibility among others. In the spirit of hegemony, the tactical privileging of class interests need not end internal debates concerning the interests of other groups, groups whose claims for rights may ultimately be delayed until the dominant paradigms the alliance formed to defeat have been overturned. If these differences are suppressed, the internal chaos of the hegemony’s body will be denied by the privileged group and covered over, and the accepting cartoon hegemony becomes instead a abnegatory cartoon, a hegemony as it is more commonly understood, dedicated to same-ness.

### The provisional

What the examples from Pynchon suggest, then, is a strength of the cartoon: the provisional. As Laclau says, incompleteness does not have to imply radical openness but merely incompleteness. Cartoons have an identity: Daffy Duck, Bugs Bunny, Roger Rabbit, Bart Simpson, DL Chastain are all characters we can recognise if we see them. As such, they are reasonably consistent entities over time. They are also incomplete and subject to revision and redrawing. They are capable of transgressing their boundaries and taking on other forms as they need to. As with Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, before he scatters, they can shift identities but are still mostly recognisable. Yet this does not imply an essential identity, because often what viewers recognise under a proper signifier (Bart Simpson, say) may shift around too. Both the Simpson family and the characters of *Gravity’s Rainbow* have a tendency to break into song and dance routines. They are still Bart, or Marge, or Osbie, or Slothrop, but there is no reason for them to be absolutely consistent (and no reason for them not to be if that suits them), to be the same Bart, Marge, Osbie or Slothrop. Homer Simpson has, at various times, been a generic cave man, a Hebrew at the time of Moses, and the Neanderthal whose tossed bone segues into the space station at the start of Kubrik’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Slothrop spends much of *Gravity’s Rainbow* as an accepting cartoon: aside from an awareness that often his actions are not straightforwardly his own, he acts like a cartoon: he transgresses identity;

he “becomes” Rocketman and the Pig-hero. He and his friends often break into song, all of which suggests that he leads a self-consciously cartoonish life. Not that he is without human fears and doubts and desires and anger – he is both cartoon and human. This, however, is the case until part four of the novel, during which Slothrop is “dismantled” and scattered at a crossroad. Initially it might seem as if They have beaten him and replicated Their system by forcing him into the impotent position of anti-paranoid non-identity: the Slothropian nuisance loose in the Zone is liquidated. Hope, however, remains. Despite his dispersal, a provisional Slothrop still haunts the narrative. In one guise, for instance, it is suggested he appears on the cover of an obscure psychedelic rock album from the late 1960s, a guest instrumentalist playing that most cartoonish of instruments, the kazoo. Pynchon’s narrator appropriately leaves it open as to whether or not this really is Slothrop, or whether we are instead still acting as paranoid readers and looking for signs of him that are not there (or following a paranoid narrator). But if it is him, he has taken a provisional identity with an appropriate name – he is identified on the cover as “a friend”.

Such an identification of provisional identity with friendship is very apt, especially in light of Slothrop’s and various members of the Counterforce’s history of kindnesses. It is this care for the plight of the other that is implicated in the semiotics of the accepting cartoon (an act of love to Toontown inhabitants), and it is the same care for the other and ability to love which characterises the labour required for perpetuating the provisionality required for the survival of radical democracy. In short, Pynchon anticipated the theorisations of cartoons within this thesis, and saw their potential for political change. The cartoon traits of love, laughter and radical democracy can each be found in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and are all vital as tools with which the figure of Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* might be read into the oppositional political sign I believe he is, rather than an offensively monstrous creation. A sense of Slothrop can, even now, be resuscitated. His mistake was to isolate himself, become not a (provisionally) committed member of a provisional hegemony but “a friend”, in a situation that demanded commitment for resistance to be possible. In the language of the late 1960s, he “drops out”, scattered under the pressure exerted by the totality he was dangerous to. They no longer allow him an identity, and he no longer resists this wish, although it is

true that he foiled their attempt to castrate him, so that he still has some potential power. His ability to empathise with the plight of others and to show care are traits the Counterforce needed; Slothrop needed the temporary shelter of a provisional hegemony to remain a threat to Them, and to do so by constructing his own identity, away from Their attentions. The Counterforce does not give up the possibility of political change. Instead they plan to use provisional tactics, ones that undermine their opposition and ones that die as they are no longer required. These tactics may be fictions, but they are useful ones.

The provisional is the acknowledgement of the other: it acknowledges the existence of the total in the non-total, of closure in an open system, of the symbolic in the semiotic, of (totalitarian) “fascism” in anti-(totalitarian) “fascist” discourse. Hence discourses opposing the we-are-not-other of (totalitarian) “fascism” must acknowledge the complicity they have with (totalitarian) “fascism”. Fascism is their cartoon: it is the element which prevents it from closing totally, from purifying and completing itself against the other. Instead, a political system that admits it is incomplete and cartoonish can construct a self-aware fiction for its own identity, based perhaps on the fiction that it already has to have an identity in the first place, one which will give it the strength, power and analytic tools it needs to struggle for its position, a position based around a cartoon analysis which constructs its position as provisionally “rational”.

This is similar to the position Donna Haraway adopts in her essay “Situated Knowledges”. She writes that “my problem and our problem is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognising our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.... We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to live in meanings and bodies that have a chance for a future” (1991, 187). Haraway argues that dominant knowledge presents itself as transcendent knowledge, based upon a metaphor of vision that claims to see everything, but from a position of exactly nowhere – from outside history. As such it

claims objectivity for itself. Yet this is a “God trick”, an illusion of perspective (189). To the contrary of this, Haraway claims that objectivity can actually only come about when perspective is embodied. “So not so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment, and definitely not about false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. This is an objective vision that initiates, rather than closes off, the problem of responsibility for the generativity of all visual practices” (190). This theorisation leads again to the possibility of provisional hegemonies: “Such preferred positioning is as hostile to various forms of relativism as to the most explicitly totalising claims to scientific authority. But the alternative to relativism is not totalisation and single vision, which is always finally the unmarked category whose power depends on systematic narrowing and obscuring. The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology” (191).

Hence part of the work in creating a situated knowledge, which may be called provisional objectivity, involves exactly an attempt to *see things from the position of the other*. This does not mean that the situated agent can speak for the other, but rather that they have the responsibility to temper their position with the position of others, to take others into *account*. Hence Derrida speaks of cares and responsibilities toward the other<sup>3</sup>, and hence kindnesses are offered and accepted in *Gravity's Rainbow*. A situated knowledge does not necessarily imply the weakening of that knowledge's validity or its utility, because its utilisation is premised upon the fact that a hegemony accepts it as a provisional description of the world. As such it, and the people who construct and act upon it, are implicated in their own history: the knowledge, as well as the hegemony of related groups, is produced by specific historical conditions, which need themselves to be theorised as a part of the knowledge. For instance, the exploitation of women as a working class by a patriarchy is a set of conditions for which a situated, provisional response might form. The response could theorise the conditions in a way which makes sense of those conditions, so that a way to overcome them can be formulated. This

---

<sup>3</sup> See Derrida (1988), “The Politics of Friendship”, for instance. For a discussion, Champagne's overview of Derrida's work (1995) treats this aspect of deconstruction more fully than most general discussions,

theorisation and its consequent political response must remain provisional, however. It must not attempt to apply its description to all instances of exploitation, because to do so it would have taken a position outside of history and forgotten about its own provisional construction. Nor, for the same reason, can it explain the conditions which afflict every member of a class regardless of differences (race, or sexual orientation, or other, less apparent differences). It must remain self-aware as a generalisation, a convenient schema produced through democratic assent, which can serve as the basis of social change, but which cannot promise the end to struggle. To promise this would be for the rule of the underclass to position itself as an overclass which can end politics. This would reintroduce exploitation and domination.

Hence part of the labour of producing self-aware cartoon knowledges and political hegemonies involves the labour of constant self-inquisition. This is what Derrida describes as “yet another effort” (1992, 108), and what Simon Critchley means when he says that “starting from today, and every day, there is a responsibility to invent democracy, to extend the democratic franchise to all areas of public and private life” (240). It never makes it: democracy can never be fully extended; but the radical feature of democracy is that it is built on a knowledge of its own such impossibility and continues extending the franchise of that impossibility anyway, the franchise of the need to keep that impossibility alive. Structures might take on their own lives and try to enact closure; democracy ensures that they remain provisional. This requires labour, continuous analysis, reflexivity, constant questioning of the basis of any structure, for that knowledge’s construction, baselessness. The cartoon-ness of a knowledge is contained in its aporias, in its gaps, incompleteness, and discontinuities. A hegemony must have its structural basis in antagonism. The very basis of that hegemony’s existence must always remain in question or its success will become undermined by its (totalitarian) “fascist” “instincts”.

*Engagement with liminal space that leads to the provisional*

A privileged distinction between a Liminal Process Favouring Totality and its antithesis, which I propose to tentatively describe as Engagement with Liminal Space that

Leads to the Provisional, is that the former is managed from a position above in order to dominate a below it cannot acknowledge, while the latter is an event generated by the democratic struggle of each individual who experiences it. Both events are formed by desire: the one by a desire for the stability that transgression into liminal space seems to abandon, the other by a desire for freedom for the other, and for the subject as other to the other. Perhaps a liminal moment that leads to provisional structure should be called an *expression*: an expression of the desire to end domination and exploitation. This translates into a desire to include and accept the other into the boundaries of the self. It is also a desire for politics and history, despite both their constructed natures (or because of them, even).

This result of liminality more closely resembles the liminal process the anthropologist Victor Turner describes in *The Ritual Process*, because it forms new social arrangements, rather than radically reinforcing old ones. But for this to happen requires work and concentration. A decision has to be reached which expresses a spirit, a political will to avoid (totalitarian) “fascism” in all its guises. This decision will be a provisional one because, ironically, structure, form and identity, which are associated with the total, has to ground the decision of the hegemony of movements to put an end to totality. To me, this suggestion takes us back to Douglas Keeseey’s comment on Pynchon, that “It is characteristic of [him] to show how the very weapon by which self and other will be destroyed has that within it which, if recognised, could save them both” (1986, 90). Such form, structure, or identity is radically constructed and understood as such, but it grounds political discourse nonetheless. This provisional grounding satisfies the nostalgia for wholeness which Liminal Processes Favouring Totality manipulate: it has the potential to answer and allay the fear of the body lying in pieces (*corps morcelé*) because the subject is able to legitimately construct a provisional body which is *not* in pieces. On the other side of this construct lies the work to overcome the fear of fragmentation itself by way of a culture of imperfect mirrors: the understanding that wholeness is not pleasingly real but that instead it ultimately leads to a destructive series of processes culminating in early death. Anti-(totalitarian) “fascist” movements have as part of their labour to continue in perpetuity to crack and warp ideological mirrors including their own. To do this is to invent democracy, to invent a politics of incompleteness, every day.

How, then, does this connect to the metaphor of the cartoon? The identification of the cartoon nature of a dominant power-structure requires the identification of an aporia, a fissure or gap in its surface perfection and self-identification. As we have discussed earlier, the gap, the edit, the space is where the cartoon exists. In the case of a total structure, a gap opens at the moment of its totalisation, at the point it seems most powerful, for that is the point at which its dependence on its cartoon – childlike, incomplete – other becomes exposed. In the act of totalisation, the total structure must move to finally annihilate the other, and in doing so it annihilates its own interior, the “belly” in which the constituting other resides. The chaos within the body, the one that produces surplus and waste, is thus abjected from the system. This leaves it as an outline that denies it is an outline; it is a reduced form, and so acts as if it were complete. It is a body that can never close itself off completely but has nostalgia for complete closure and a delusion that such closure *is* possible.

It is at this point that the “other’s” relation to the total structure can become something other than being totality’s victim. Laughter partially defines the cartoon because it puts the subject into process, a “regression” from his or her assumption of their own completion. Totality is, among other things, a monumental (monstrous) joke. As it has arguably resulted in a great number of deaths, it is both a joke of monstrous proportions and the joke of a monster that has created a steady stream of monuments. Laughter is a practice that can diffuse totality. Politically, a spectacle can be made of totality in all its forms, so that the sight of the total will produce laughter. From the openness, the process, of this laughter, an amatory spirit can emerge, the love born of a connection between open systems. Love is another characteristic of the open cartoon, the cartoon that knows it is a cartoon. And, politically, anger at the dominating, total system, and a desire to overthrow it and change it, can come of the consciousness that laughter at totality can produce. Politically, this desire to change the total can take the form of political groups with the same (provisional) interests – a provisional hegemony between groups made “other” and thus victims of the oppression of totality. The fact that, as Laclau and Mouffe say, the political horizon is an open one, no matter how concentrated a totality’s attempt to close it may be, is the best hope for this alliance. The alliance and the groups it consists of can be provisional, and yet remain identities. Decisions for



political action can be made, or no political action could possibly take place. As identities, such an anti-(totalitarian) “fascist” “counterforce”, and the groups it comprises, may be required to look and act a little like the totalities they oppose, but this act can be a masquerade, performed with laughter at what the self might become. These groups keep in sight the fact that they are cartoons of political movements and realise that their status as provisionality, as accepting and open cartoons, and as groups dedicated to keeping the basis of their own identity “impossible”. Thus they are groups dedicated to keeping the political horizon open and politics alive because to not do so would be to invite a return to exploitation, oppression, fascism, and war. They realise that their existence requires them to unravel, as Osbie Feel realises this for the Counterforce in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Otherwise they claim an essential association with the higher ground, which expresses a desire to be “on top”, and they will have lost sight of their own cartoon status, falling prey instead to Liminal Processes Favouring Totality. This would reinforce the position of Pynchon's category of elect.

This continued opening of a cartoon space by way of Engagement with Liminal Space that Leads to the Provisional, the laughter at the total as a cartoon, a joke, will unite (totalitarian) “fascism's” opponents, and may split away members of totalities, because of Engagements with Liminal Space that Leads to the Provisional. If they can be made to see the joke, and be made to see that they eventually will become victims of the (totalitarian) “fascism” themselves, and hence then appreciate the cartooning of the totality, they might be made to break ranks. This is true especially if they are less successfully conditioned members of their totality. Some members of dominance-seeking (or dominant) political groups will undergo a Liminal Process Favouring Totality at the offence caused by the exposure their group has suffered (see Rowe, 18-19, on male reviewers' reactions to *A Question of Silence*, for instance). But for the less fanatic members, love and psychic health is not beyond them; in Theweleit's language, full birth remains possible for them. They could once more be open to the world, and to others. If this could happen, then the dominant group will shrink, and could eventually lose its dominant position on the political horizon to a plural, radically democratic hegemony. This can only happen through praxis and political agitation. Such agitation can never cease, or democratic movements would risk the closure of the horizon, making them lose

sight of their cartoon skeleton again; this would signal the dominance once again of the Liminal Process Favouring Totality.

If deconstruction radically destabilises the ground upon which all identities are made, how can political identities form strongly enough to be capable of tackling a totality? It seems likely to be on the basis, at least initially, of the grounds that are impossible but which nonetheless are there and working in the interests of the dominant totality. Opposition to totality, at least as I see it, is likely to effectively come from within totality, just as an amatory spirit is built upon a prior narcissism. The oppositional hegemony can gain an identity, a tool it requires, from its opponent. This allows it to form, but it means that, initially, the identity it is likely to take will be built along the same cartoon political lines as the totality itself. The fact that it “opposes” totality suggests, after all, that it may mirror totality, and that it would therefore form upon dichotomous lines. If this is the case, it is at this point that the hegemonies opposing totality are at most danger of totalising themselves, and suffering Liminal Processes Favouring Totality. To avoid this, its new identity must remain a cartoonish version of the totality’s: the cartoon must remain in the open, and not sutured over. It may be formed on its cartoon other’s back (the cartoon of the totality, which because it is a totality loses sight of its being a cartoon), but must acknowledge, must de-purify itself with, the cartoon other’s part in itself. It should not close itself off from the impulse for totality within it. But this impulse must be kept sight of, for if it is to escape, then the antagonism its trace causes will suture over, and this liminal moment will favour totality. As the provisional basis for a hegemony threatens to become a total basis, as time goes on, provisionality can only be rescued by political agitation from within the group, based upon and in opposition to the totality-favouring identity that the group has slumped into. As with before, new hegemonies form from within the old structure they oppose. Ultimately it is impossible to predict what form new groupings such as these might eventually take, but such an evolution, if it is to remain democratic, has to be accompanied by the groups’ continued commitment to deconstructing its own ideals and its own decisions, continuing to foreground the impossibility of the decisions they nonetheless make.

Politics, if this path is followed, will tend to morph continuously into provisional

forms and identities which break open and change when they start to become permanent and self-validating, something that may be signalled by an attempt to limit dissent. But they will only continue to commit to democracy if the desire to stay open to the other remains, and what work will be required for this commitment in the future is impossible to predict. This sort of movement does not happen naturally or necessarily, but only if the horrors of totality are not lost sight of and if the will for them to never return remains the majority will. Nonetheless, for now, provisional forms seem to me capable of satisfying the nostalgia for wholeness and ideals that fascism exploits. With Engagements with Liminal Space that Leads to the Provisional, people do not have to give up identity, but rather can form their own accepting one. After all, totalistic identities are powerful despite being ultimately formed on impossible grounds themselves.

## Chapter eleven

### The Rabbit's Handcuffs: Tying the Toon to the Real

*Not to love der fuhrer  
Is a great disgrace  
So ve go heil! heil!  
Right in der fuhrer's face!*

-Spike Jones

#### Anelypsis into the "real" scene

We have seen how both Ellis in *American Psycho* and Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* construct their readership in a way that it may recognise that "we" collectively are as much victims of the "system" as the characters in the fictions. Ellis gives the reader little opportunity to oppose Bateman's interpretation of events, forcing the grounds for readerly resistance outside of the text itself and into the world of the book and reader. Pynchon takes his entire readership and sits them in a theatre before rhetorically firing a rocket at them. Ellis plays with the pornographic, a type of representation that physically affects its readers in a manner few others do. Once he has established a pornographic fantasy space in *American Psycho*, he brutally destroys its "utopian" elements by establishing a space for brutal violence with exactly the same detached tone and diction, thereby suggesting the two spaces occupy the same ground. Similarly, the novel depicts a "pornography" of consumer living, where everything anyone could possibly desire is within easy reach. But this too is undercut as Bateman conflates this utopia with the power to murder with impunity.

If we remember, Walter Benjamin wrote, regarding fascism's "aestheticisation of politics", "Communism responds by politicising art". While it is clear that this must relate to Benjamin's analysis of film in his essay, the direct connection is absent. Susan Buck-Morss ends her discussion of the "Artwork Essay" by suggesting how this response might work. Buck-Morss refers to the camera because this is Benjamin's own concern in his essay:

The camera can aid us in knowledge of fascism, because it provides an "aesthetic" experience that is nonauratic, critically "testing", capturing with its "unconscious optics" precisely the dynamics of narcissism on which the politics of fascism depends, but which its own auratic aesthetics conceals.... Such

knowledge is not historicist. The juxtaposition of photographs of Hitler's face and Darwin's illustrations [which Buck-Morss used to demonstrate how Hitler used the Nuremberg rallies to reflect an image of wholeness back to a mass in narcissistic crisis] will not answer the complexities of von Ranke's question of "how it actually was" in Germany, or what determined the uniqueness of its history. Rather, the juxtaposition creates a synthetic experience that resonates with our own time, providing us, today, with a double recognition – first, of our own infancy, in which, for so many of us, the face of Hitler appeared as evil incarnate, the bogeyman of our own childhood fears. Second, it shocks us into awareness that the narcissism that we have developed as adults, that functions as an aestheticising tactic against the shock of modern experience – and that is appealed to daily by the image-phantasmagoria of mass culture – is the ground from which fascism can again push forth. To cite Benjamin: "In shutting out the experience [of the inhospitable, blinding age of big-scale industrialism], the eye perceives an experience of a complimentary nature, in the form of its spontaneous after-image". Fascism is that afterimage. In its reflecting mirror we recognise ourselves. (41)

The camera has the potential to create, Buck-Morss suggests, a non-auratic spectacle of Hitler, the man who took it upon himself to embody German fascism. Normally, the dynamics of narcissism, the Liminal Process Favouring Totality, are concealed by an aura, which naturalises the wholeness fanaticized retroactively during a narcissistic crisis. The aura, then, creates the illusion that totalisation is possible and desirable, and so it represents the suppression of the other. It gives us all an attractive way to "get the better of" the "chaos" we perceive around us every day. An abnegatory cartoon denying its incomplete identity is auratic, in this sense, because it aestheticises politics. It gives a political function (the removal of chaos from society) to an aesthetic ideal (the achievement of the perception of perfect form). It tries to "complete" itself. If we remember, for the rocket in *Gravity's Rainbow*, which represents a state of perfection, completion such as this requires it to destroy itself. A cartoon that admits to its cartoon element is non-auratic, is critically "testing". It continually calls attention to the gaps between "itself" and "reality", "reality" in this sense being a completion, or an aestheticisation (the fabled "third dimension"). The accepting cartoon is more "realistic" because it does not place an aestheticised ideal and a reality in the same representational space. It never tries to "complete" itself in any final, irreversible way.

The mirror of a consumer society produces the after-image of Patrick Bateman. We may not recognise ourselves in his acts of murder and torture, but some of us may do, if we were honest, in our desire to be able to purchase and consume anything we want from food to sex, or to consume items so that we can establish or keep social

status, or to keep up an “image”. These things represent attempts by us to make up for a lack, to complete the image we have of ourselves that does not match our own experience. We may recognise ourselves also in any compulsions we discover we have to occasionally “get the better of” someone, to cut their speech off with an acerbic retort (“verbal machine gunning.... They identify their own faults in others with punctilious brilliance and mercilessly annihilate them”, says Theweleit [1989b, 277-8]).

*Gravity's Rainbow* ends on the note of an after-image,

The last image was too immediate for any eye to register. It may have been a human figure, dreaming of an early evening in each great capital luminous enough to tell him he will never die, coming outside to wish on the first star. But it was *not a star*, it was falling, a bright angel of death. And in the darkening and awful expanse something has kept on, a film we have not learned to see... it is now the close-up of the face, a face we all know—” (760)

Might that face be Hitler's? Nixon's? Our own, each individually? Is the Orpheus Theatre an equivalent to Nuremberg, where we are tricked by a phantasmagorium into experiencing wholeness as part of a crowd while being prepared at the same time for literal fragmentation (Buck-Morss, 35)? (The aestheticisation of politics, to Benjamin, can lead only to war). In the Orpheus theatre, the audience is being prepared to enjoy as an aesthetic event the preparations for its own destruction by the rocket, being “taken in love” so that it will become “blindingly one”, perhaps.

*Vineland* posits two types of “after-image”, the technologically mediated “ghosts”, the Thanatoids, and Brock Vond. The Thanatoids represent the pacification of America's people and the pacification of the once-rebellious 1960s. They represent thus Their control over the revolutionary movements that could have potentially produced a change in the order, but were defeated. They suggest that “we” are now a totally subdued population in a totalitarian society. Vond is also a return, an after-image. While Vond appears frequently in the narrative, it is largely by way of flashback sequences; the re-active Vond of 1984 is only ever glimpsed from a distance, or his presence felt by the actions of his men. Together, the Thanatoids and Vond represent the armoured externalised ego of America and the people frozen within it, bound in front of the “Tube”.

However, this passive “national” interior shows some signs of activity in *Vineland*. The Thanatoids awaken, while the citizens of Vineland County find themselves abuzz at all the activity around them. The ones who knew Vond from the

1960s, such as DL and Ditzah, are even partially activated again. One possible explanation for this thawing is that the armoured exterior is under pressure. Although a surprise to the reader, the kind of budget cuts that terminate Vond's project are often predictable for those involved. The possibility of "decommissioning" may have become real to Vond. Footsoldiers such as Vond are kept under pressure from above as much as below. An ambitious one like Vond, who desires elect status, is likely to adopt a reaction formation if threatened with enforced inactivity. He might find a battle to fight, one which allows him to release the pressure that has built up<sup>1</sup>. For this to happen, paradoxically, the soldiers require an enemy, so to find one, they encourage the activity of the interior. Once its "thaw" reaches a critical point, the "threat" it poses can be dealt with. Although this may lead to the soldier male asserting greater control after they have experienced a Liminal Process Favouring Totality, it does give those allied with the "interior" an opportunity to recognise their situation and politicise, to form a "we" hegemony.

*Politicising the spectacle/ seizing the means of interpretation*

The obvious difference between German fascism as embodied in Hitler's body and "the image-phantasmagoria of mass culture" that appeals daily to "the narcissism that we have developed as adults, that functions as an aestheticising tactic against the shock of modern experience" is that the latter has no specific leader to embody it. Although political leaders may have more or less influence (Reagan and Nixon in *Vineland* controlled the "repressive state apparatus", but the degree to which they used the spectacle, and to which the spectacle exerts control independent of the state apparatus altogether, is open to debate. The spectacle is, after all, not subject to the vote).

In *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland*, Pynchon provides us with "synthetic experiences" as Buck-Morss describes them, cartoons which, the author hopes, will help readers recognise the mechanics of their subjection, the *fact* of their subjection, and therefore their complicity in their own subjection. James Hans concludes, in regards to *Gravity's Rainbow*, "If we open our codes to the scrutiny Pynchon places them under, the confusion does indeed give way to wonder, both because we see the

---

<sup>1</sup> For the proto-fascist's hatred of "bourgeois" inactivity and the non-mobilised life, see Theweleit 1989b

world as alive rather than as a big dumb rock and because the novel itself comes to be seen in the same light. It is not an ossified structure that we can passively consume...; it is an attempt to jar us out of our passivity, to remove us from the world of the glozing neuter in which we spend most of our lives" (280). According to Hans, Pynchon's intention is to politicise the reader and to make him or her active, to get them out of the theatre and onto the streets, so to speak. This is something *Gravity's Rainbow* shares with his next novel. *Vineland* is unsubtle in its insistence upon juxtaposing two traditional opposites – "free" U.S. society and (totalitarian) "fascism" – and discovering that the valorised one is merely an extension of the abjected one. Pynchon here shares with Ellis the sense of a continuity of what initially seemed like opposites. Both *Vineland* and *Gravity's Rainbow* juxtapose "cartoon" America with a "real" political America, with similar results. Because fascism is so abject in our culture, this is designed to affect a shock-into-action on the part of a receptive reader. It is designed to "affect" its readers. But Pynchon does not employ this tactic as spectacularly as Ellis, which may be why Pynchon never suffered the book-burning threats Ellis did over *American Psycho*<sup>2</sup>.

In *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman's behaviour swings between the childishly petty and the appallingly violent. He sulks when he finds he has a "mediocre" business card in comparison to his companions. He only grudgingly apologises to McDermott for "insulting the pizzas at Pastals" (109) after McDermott "proves" that Donald Trump likes them: "'if the pizza at Pastals is okay with Donny'... hating to admit this to McDermott... 'It's okay with me'" (110); he's fiercely competitive about dress etiquette. This shows a glimpse of our childhood, the narcissism of childhood by way of "cartooned", satirised adult behaviour, and so shocks us into a recognition that that behaviour – in this book always in the context of spectacle capitalism – is the "ground from which" Bateman's violence pushes forth. The juxtapositions he creates function in the way Buck-Morss outlined; we suddenly recognise our daily culture, our assumptions, to be continuous with Bateman's, as with Ellis's undercutting of pornographic discourse and language with violence. A reader

---

388-98. The theme also intrudes into much of 1989a, 3-228.

<sup>2</sup> Part of the reason for this may be that "fascism" as an accusation or description can be itself accused of banality, even if it is deployed accurately in a technical sense. It is too common in social discourse to describe something you don't like as "fascist". A conflation of the consumer impulse with torture-murder, however, is somewhat more outrageous.



who has responded physically to the pornographic sequences in the novel will feel their complicity with its violence physically, his or her body reacting to the change.

The effect of such a juxtaposition works in an edit, a gap between obviously unreal “fun and games” and overly real violence, in the time between the narrator describing Christie’s costume and an injured Elizabeth running from the room (*American Psycho*, 289; see 11-12 above). This gap is also liminal: in this scene Bateman only kills after experiencing a Liminal Process Favouring Totality. After orgasm, where he experiences a loss (as we are experiencing the loss of narrative in the edit between the sexual and the violent stages of the episode), he is suddenly on the rampage. The loss we feel, however, “cartoons” us; the “edit” manipulates us from above, making us pawns of the manipulative text. It is as if the book physically interferes in “the real world”, making readers perform a kind of “song and dance act” for it. Readers are prompted by this juxtaposition to realise we are equivalent to a “cartoon”, to become aware of our diminished autonomy, and our loss of dimensions. The violent part of the episode cartoons the pornographic; individually there is a blindness working in each, in the subtle manipulations of the spectacle (personified by Bateman) in the first, in the crazed result of Bateman’s Liminal Process Favouring Totality in the second. But the shock the second gives readers who were aroused by the pornographic content of the first has the potential to make them act as self-aware cartoons, as we are shocked into critically reading them for the origins of the power we have become subjected to. Rather than passive spectators of an entertainment, as we might be if we read regular non-violent pornography, we now have an *interest* in discovering the processes behind the manipulation. Ellis here takes a significant, if calculated, series of risks, not the least of which is the very real possibility of provoking among his readership Liminal Processes Favouring Totality. If this happened they might form in two possible directions: firstly, readers might become like Bateman, share his attitudes to a degree, or secondly, as a reaction-formation against Ellis, against men, or against the system. The novel *may* be seen by one readership as a misogynistic tract; the possibility holds that some of the descriptions might be copied in a real life murder. Hence the book is hated; some people want it burned. But this reading experience might also lead to an Engagement with Liminal Space that Leads to the Provisional; it may allow readers to escape their society and the book’s power.

As we have seen, Laura Tanner notes that Bateman resists interpretation. This impacts both on how the character sees himself (and drives his [totalitarian] “fascism”,

as we saw in Chapter five), and on how he is seen by readers. Bateman's very representation of self mocks that self and the processes that form it. His presentation of self itself makes the self he presents impossible to maintain, not despite of but because of the fact that this self is a (totalitarian) "fascist" one. He is a non-auratic spectacle and a personification of Liminal Processes Favouring Totality *once readers learn to see him as such*. (Those susceptible to Liminal Processes Favouring Totality themselves may experience him as auratic.) He can be non-auratic because he is a cartoon; he is not presented realistically, a fact many critics have complained about. His violence is a radical, narcissistic response to weaknesses the "system" keeps opening in order to elicit just such responses, these "closed" responses that help to perpetuate a system we can understand as (totalitarian) "fascist". Bateman's murders are his attempt to complete himself, or at least, since he is so ephemeral, to establish, to assert himself as an entity. To do this, his ideology demands that he drive from himself the spectre of his incompleteness, a spectre that the ideology views as feminine. As an abnegatory cartoon, he desires the destruction of the cartoon within him and that he denies (instead projecting outward, into the world). Bateman, however, can be so obviously cartoonish that maintaining his borders becomes impossible for him. The act of destroying this cartoon, tortuously, makes him cartoonishly incomplete, as we saw in Chapter one (13). He knows he is sketchy, a cartoon with no depth or centre, but this knowledge gives him nothing but pain, which he then drives outwards. He cannot accept that he is *necessarily* cartoonishly empty, that he is a reflex, an automaton, "a killing machine that happens to be in the form of a man", as Rey Chow put it (op cit).

Bateman is the afterimage of spectacle capitalism. We can see this figure very clearly: unfulfilled, unfulfillable, desperately unhappy, reeling towards disaster. The comparison we made between Bateman and the *Freikorps* members in Chapter five show clearly that this afterimage is fascism. At the same time he is presented physically and socially as desirable and as a masculine ideal – handsome, rich, in excellent physical shape – he is just what we are constantly told we desire to be ourselves. However, Bateman's banal narcissism, and the fact that it so obviously forms his psychosis – it is the American Psychosis – shocks us "into awareness that the narcissism that we have developed as adults, that functions as an aestheticising tactic against the shock of modern experience – and that is appealed to daily by the image-phantasmagoria of mass culture – is the ground from which fascism [or, if we don't recognise this, then evil, say] can again push forth". By being forced by the text into a

position of our own deterioration of self, our manipulation by a higher power, we are forced to identify with the Bateman cartoon, and hence with our own (totalitarian) “fascism”. In Bateman we recognise ourselves. This is particularly if we are masculine or put some stock in various masculinist practices, or if we are highly competitive and need to be “on top”. Bateman’s ability to use the capitalist social totality as an ego extension, allowing him to fade into the background and continue killing, as we discussed in Chapter five as well, also suggests the complicity between our own society and (totalitarian) “fascism”.

This ought to shock us. And it is this which simply renders moot the debates over whether Bateman’s acts are true or merely textual events, or fantasies. When all is said, it doesn’t actually matter whether Bateman “really is” a murderer or not in the fictional world of the novel. The murders are still a logical, if extreme, outcome of the pathology of the ideology Bateman embodies, the practices of his narcissism and his capitalism. And this ideology is, as Kaplan notes about fascism, exemplified in “banal” everyday life (50-52): in Bateman’s distance from and appalling treatment of the women he doesn’t murder, in his and his friends’ casual misogyny, in the way he treats (and is treated by) people he regards as other to himself and his social grouping, in the way he, for example, acquires a tanning bed when he finds out his compatriot has one, in the way he knows the dress code for “yuppie” fashion better than everyone else, in the way he cannot abide anything but physical perfection in women, in the way he and his friends try to one-up each other like children. The purpose of almost everything they do is to position themselves *on top*: they get the best designer clothes, are seen at the right clubs and restaurants, desire the most prestigious accounts to broker.

The Bateman figure shows all of this up as a ludicrous grotesque, often funny, as often terrifying and sickening. He is a cartoon. He is a cartoon, though, who cannot abide being one. Tanner suggests that the novel itself acts in this way: it is a reaction formation on its own, that “our control over the act of interpretation seems to disappear beneath the force of a text that naturalises itself as an object even as it appropriates the participation of its readerly subjects” (114). If a reader is unmoved by Ellis’s manipulation of pornographic structures in the example I gave before, he or she will fall prey in other ways. The book’s repetition, banality, gruesome detail, and lack of realistic characterisation mean that it acts on a reader in a similar way to Bateman acting upon one of his victims, when he forces her to watch a video of a previous murder. Bateman’s “goal is not only to torture and murder [a victim] but to make her

see that torture and murder as an inevitable, necessary conclusion. Insofar as the novel terrorises the reader, it is because it denies the reader's subjectivity in just such a way" (111). She calls for "oppositional reading... [opposing] the very terms of readership implicit in the text" (114), and indeed just such a strategy is called for. In the context of this novel, traditional terms of readership promote Liminal Processes Favoursing Totality, and give readers the feeling that if we are not on top we are nowhere at all. The fact that, if Tanner is right, all readers are rendered victims of the psycho, gives us all an interest in overthrowing him, because we are othered and negated by the text, and so othered by the narcissistic structure Bateman rests upon.

Tanner's argument for the existence of the absolute closure of the text rests upon Bateman's impossibility, the difficulty of placing him somewhere: his own self-deconstruction. This "authorises not the reader's right to resist but the reader's powerlessness to interpret knowledgeably" (110). The reader is thus placed in the same position as a silent woman discussed by Kathleen Rowe; we are "conned" by the loss caused by our predicament into experiencing a Liminal Process Favoursing Totality, only our belief in totality is negative, favoursing silence and submission to the awesome and powerful totality that has formed itself at our expense. Momentarily, though, Tanner forgets that absolute closure is impossible, and that the liminal moment can both deny us from interpreting Bateman or free us to interpret creatively or, if necessary, aggressively. By denying us so vehemently, Bateman slips. The Liminal Process Favoursing Totality necessary for Bateman to complete his act of totalisation also makes that completion impossible, because we, in the Liminal moment, experience the limits of the system, we see a place where nothing need be true, where we can break down and re-form.

The way Bateman represents himself reminds careful readers of the cartoon, and, as we have discovered, cartoons represent, as a cultural meaning, various types of incompleteness. Both the abnegatory and the accepting cartoon are incomplete – totality is as incomplete as non-totality. Engagement with Liminal Space that Leads to the Provisional can be seen in this light, an expression of self that embraces this incompleteness. But cartoons *do* have identity – by embracing incompleteness, they take their other, the total, into them as a part of them, albeit a part to regard with suspicion. What this means is that they can form, but incompletely, provisionally, temporarily, or with a recognition that form will slip and change. But it also means that there is an aspect to their selves that tends toward totalisation, and that *desires* totalisation.

Engagement with Liminal Space that Leads to the Provisional provides an oppositional reading in the manner that Tanner calls for. Despite Bateman's impossibility, we can nonetheless construct him knowledgeably; we can construct a provisional knowledge based on the tools and the information we have. Because we face incompleteness, readers have to intervene, venture an interpretation and argue for a position. All of this is on the understanding that any decision will be provisional, subject to change as conditions in the shifting text do. It will be a cartoon knowledge, and cartoon information, but nonetheless something that can be used. This is particularly as the deeper-set structures of Bateman's (totalitarian) "fascism" are far less ephemeral than his surface personality. Liminal Processes Favouring Totality, although a self-abnegatingly incomplete system of management, are nonetheless rather constant here – easily constant enough to be flagged theoretically, and so for resistances to organise against them. And as readers oppressed by Bateman, we have a strong political interest in resisting and opposing him, rather than simply indulging in aesthetically distanced ludic reading pleasures. We are interested in action, action moreover, which lies outside the scope of the book. Rather than anger directed at the book, which might be interpreted as a "safety valve" the system can use to tame subversive material, one can instead become angry at the totality the book cartoons. *American Psycho* therefore has the potential to create a community of interest against totality, against the attempt to totalise, and hence against the Liminal Processes Favouring Totality themselves. That is why he is an "American" psycho and not merely a psychopath. He "represents" figuratively, the psychosis of an America managed by a (totalitarian) "fascist" ideology. And because it is the preposterous figure of Bateman that personifies and embodies these processes of management, the system's ambitions for total management are revealed, in *American Psycho*, to be a joke, and a very sick one.

One of the most disquieting aspects of Ellis's book is that it is a comedy. Bateman's banal day-to-day behaviour, and that of his compatriots – the behaviour that reveals the extent of Bateman's ideological interpellation – is often very funny. The "yuppies'" constant misrecognition of one another is comic; the banality of their conversations (entire conversations on the art of discerning good brands of mineral water from bad); their attitudes (for instance the scene where the waitress's minutely imperfect knee comes to be seen as a major disfigurement). They are all paid preposterous amounts of money but seldom seem to do any work – another of Ellis's

jabs at the young executive classes of the 1980s. Other scenes played by Ellis for laughs include Bateman's disbelieved confessions, his encounter with Bono when he's in the front row at a U2 concert and isn't listening, and his ongoing encounters with Luis Corruthers, the closeted stockbroker who is attracted to Bateman (he takes Bateman's attempt to strangle him as a caress, surprising Bateman into not finishing the job). The cartoonness of the characters' personalities is also written as a joke, although, significantly, these are jokes none of the characters can admit to and "get". One major constant in the book is that the characters all take themselves deadly seriously, something that tends to generate comic situations. The best example is one I have cited already, where Bateman finds himself lunching with Christopher Armstrong, a compatriot at Bateman's firm P&P. Armstrong has recently returned from the Bahamas (at least so he claims). He tells Bateman about his trip, but his conversation is pure travel catalogue:

Travellers looking for that perfect vacation this summer may do well to look south, as far south as the Bahamas and the Caribbean islands. There are at least five smart reasons for visiting the Caribbean including the weather and the festivals and events, the less crowded hotels and attractions, the price and the unique cultures.... Water sports are of course the leading attraction. But golf courses and tennis courts are in excellent condition and the pros at many of the resorts are made more available during the summer. Many of the courts are lit for night playing as well.... As for dining out, the Caribbean has become more attractive as the island cuisine has mixed well with the European culture.... Sightseeing is highlighted by the European culture which established many of the islands as regional fortresses in the seventeen hundreds.... (*American Psycho*, 137-140)

Bateman becomes extremely angry during this episode, possibly because Armstrong is discomforting him by revealing cartoon-ness too obviously. (Armstrong has no inkling he is doing this, however.) Before Bateman loses his sense of self altogether (the episode is cut off mid-sentence, suggesting this) he begins associating Armstrong with a bloody pulp – Armstrong has become other and is thus associated with the body's interior, and also with its lower regions: Bateman describes Armstrong as an "asshole" (140).

At other times, however, the comedy in *American Psycho* is very grim indeed. His cleaners clean the blood and remains off his clothes and his apartment walls, yet he is never apprehended for any of his crimes. Real estate agents prefer to quietly cover over evidence of a double murder in case it affects sales. Bateman at one point attempts

to cook and eat one of his victims, but his lack of cooking skills lets him down. He is glimpsed, sobbing, "I just want to be loved" (345) over the mess he creates. All these things are not only patently preposterous, but appeal as strangely plausible as well. They are consistent with the pre-eminent logic of capital and the commodity, with the dehumanisation materialism creates. Ellis has drawn this rampantly commodified world convincingly, and hence reveals it as a huge and monstrous joke, a joke on all that live in it. The "aura" of such a system withers under this satiric gaze. Patrick Bateman exists to be laughed at. His murders are not; his acts of killing are not funny at all (even if the aftermath sometimes is). But the banal manifestations of Bateman's (totalitarian) "fascism" are, as is his complete lack of self-awareness. Bateman is a joke, just as the patriarchy is for Rowe, and he is a joke which, just as Rowe suggests with the patriarchy, should also make the people he oppresses angry. Among these people number his entire readership, a group who have the potential to form a "we" hegemony that can provisionally oppose what Bateman is, and oppose him in his manifestations in the real world, the world outside the novel. And we can get angry at what Bateman is, which is the tendencies of capitalist patriarchy. He can act as a catalyst to make people first laugh at (this represents a change in consciousness) and then get angry at having to live in a system of (totalitarian) "fascism". If enough people realise that the structures naturalised as rightly dominant in society are just a joke, a joke that holds massive power over them, then this "de-auratised" system would present itself as vulnerable, suddenly. If enough people become righteously angry as a result, particularly when it becomes obvious that that system "devours" or "consumes" people, that it is there for the benefit of an elite at the expense of everyone and everything else, then a powerful provisional hegemony might form. This is what I take to be the political lessons of Pynchon and Ellis. In these circumstances the spirit for change might begin to prevail. If it is recognised that totality must be opposed, but opposed powerfully, that change will involve recognition of the provisional, and recognition of the power of the "excluded middle". It would mean the hegemony would continue to test its assumptions and acknowledge its unstable foundations and incomplete nature. It would break up when it had succeeded, and its components could then re-form around other points of action.

By characterising, in their cartoonish way, society as being (totalitarian) "fascist" in nature, both Pynchon and Ellis "up the stakes" for their readers. They both suggest that the readers of their novels are victims or potential victims of the system –

we are all in Nixon/Zchubb's theatre with Rocket 00000 plummeting onto us, a very real possibility in the midst of the nuclear build up in the cold war. Alternatively we are all victims of Patrick Bateman's psychosis, of his murderous ways. Even though (totalitarian) "fascism" might seem a system in which one might survive, either to prosper or fall, both writers suggest that it will ultimately destroy us all. They thus give "us" reason to organise against it, and Pynchon, with his suggestion of the potential politics of the cartoon, suggests how non-(totalitarian) "fascist" political responses might eventually be formed. The resistance comes from within the system, from its chaotic interior, if you like; it may, tactically, say "*heil!*", but "right in the *Fuhrer's* face". It depends upon communication among the masses, the "all of us", discussion between us as to the danger we are in, so that political hegemonies against the established order can increase in size and power. The leak in the belly of the (totalitarian) "fascist" system may then become a flood, a movement from the excluded middle, on behalf of a half-formed "cartoon" that the system simply can no longer contain or re-co-opt: a provisionally based, participatory, radically democratic politics.

There is urgency about these novels which suggests a pressing political need. Yet these are postmodern texts. Although they seem to display all the postmodern trappings of fragmentation, elusiveness of meaning, radical open-ness, self-referentiality, and loss of character subjectivity, there is nonetheless a (provisional) "subject" to these books, the critique of current postmodern politics fleshed out above. How are postmodern artists to respond to a world living its postmodernity in totalitarian conditions? If they are willing to posit powerful provisional meanings – they are writing, after all, in a relatively permanent form – then we as readers should be willing to take the books on the terms they are offered and construct provisional meaning from them. There is a "spirit" in which the novels depict what we can construct as the state of the world as their authors "see it", notwithstanding the fact that meaning refuses closure, and that therefore an author should not be considered the only definitively authoritative arbiter of meaning in a text. Such statements, though, are not just gestures – postmodern concerns such as the deconstruction of authoritative voice are "central" to the dismantling of (totalitarian) "fascism". Pynchon, clearly, and Ellis, I'm suggesting, wish to see the world experience its postmodern phase in a state of radical democracy. Reaching this state requires action and intervention, as well as a theoretical inquiry into the power of those in authority. These novels offer this. But by making their audience



feel that power, and our own status in relation to it, in both the gut and in the bloodflow, they hold out the possibility of “real” action, a response in “reality”.

But such a “real” response represents, paradoxically, not a loss of our own reality, but a recognition that we are not as autonomous, as “real” as we might have believed. Here, I describe the “diminished” state that results as a cartoon. The cartoon is certainly not the only metaphor that can be used to describe this state, it is just the metaphor suggested by Pynchon’s two novels and applied here to Ellis’s one. It is a metaphor that gets us, with the categories of abnegatory and accepting cartoons, some way to finding a postmodern politics that can recognise difference within its system and still remain a viable tool. There is no magic switch that governs liminal processes and experiences, which can ensure that an experience of liminal space will lead to the provisional rather than the total. Once the dominant, non-democratic or (totalitarian) “fascist” ideology has been rejected, ideology itself is not transcended. In a purely democratic state, there would be no ideology. But that state does not exist, and cannot exist – democracy never arrives, therefore ideology will always be with us. Avoiding Liminal Processes Favouring Totality requires nothing less than active work, in each instance, so that as many of “us” see the joke, and see that we are implicated in the joke, and become determined to resist the power of that joke. Between them, the implication of all the texts under discussion here is that we must accept the rabbit within us, and if we can, one by one, then when the moment is right, we may be capable of taking our hands from the cuffs. But only once enough of us have learned to see the film...

## References

- Albritton, Robert (1995). "The De(con)struction of Marx's Capital." *Post-Ality: Marxism and Postmodernism* (ed) Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, Teresa L. Ebert and Donald Morton. Washington DC: Maisonneuve Press, 76-97.
- Althusser, Louis (1971). *Essays on Ideology*. London: Verso.
- Ames, Christopher (1990). "Power and the Obscene Word: Discourses of Extremity in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*". *Contemporary Literature* 31:2, Summer, 191-207.
- Ames, Winslow and David Kunzle (1978). "Caricature, Cartoons, and Comic Strip." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3: 909-922.
- Anderson, Perry (1984). *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Araton, Harvey (1996). "Spoofing a Game That's Already Cartoonish". *New York Times*, June 2, final late ed, sec 2, 11.
- Archer, Wes (1994). "Itchy and Scratchy Land" written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Wes Archer. *The Simpsons*, created by Matt Groening, 20th Century Fox, episode 2F01.
- Arendt, Hannah (1967). *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 3rd ed. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Baker, Jeffrey S. (1993). "A Democratic Pynchon: Counterculture, Counterforce and Participatory Democracy." *Pynchon Notes* 32-33, Spring-Fall 1993, 99-131.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1984). *Rabalais and His World* (tr) Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Barthes, Roland (1974). *S/Z* (tr) Richard Miller. New York: Noonday.
- Barthes, Roland (1982). "The Reality Effect". *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader* (ed) Tsvetan Todorov. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 11-17.
- Bataille, Georges (1985). "The Psychological Structure of Fascism." Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess* (tr) Allen Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 137-160.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1983). "The Ecstasy of Communication" *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (ed) Hal Foster. Port Townsend, Bay Press, 126-134.

- Baudrillard, Jean (1984). "The Precession of Simulacra" *Art After Modernism* (ed) Brian Wallis. New York: Museum of Contemporary Art, 253-281
- Baudrillard, Jean (1987). *The Evil Demon of Images*. Annandale: Power Institute.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1988). *America*. New York: Verso.
- Bauerlein, Mark (2001). "Social Constructionism: Philosophy for the Academic Workplace". *Partisan Review* LXVIII:2.  
[www.partisanreview.org/archive/2001/2/bauerlein](http://www.partisanreview.org/archive/2001/2/bauerlein)
- Bawer, Bruce (1988). *Diminishing Fictions: Essays on the Modern Novel and its Critics*. St. Paul: Graywolf.
- Baxter, Tara and Nikki Craft (undated internet page). "There Are Better Ways of Taking Care of Bret Easton Ellis than Just Censoring Him."  
<http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/Porn/Ellis1.html>
- Beardsworth, Richard (1996). *Derrida and the Political*. New York: Routledge.
- Benjamin, Walter (1970). "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". *Illuminations* (ed) Hannah Arendt. London: Cape, 217-251.
- Berger, James (1995) "Cultural Trauma and the 'Timeless Burst': Pynchon's Revision of Nostalgia in *Vineland*". *Postmodern Culture* 5:3, May.  
[http://www.themodernword.com/pynchon/papers\\_berger.html#anchor1212020](http://www.themodernword.com/pynchon/papers_berger.html#anchor1212020)
- Bersani, Leo (1989). "Pynchon, Paranoia and Literature". *Representations* 25, Winter, 99-118.
- Brooker, M. Keith (1993). "America and Its Discontents: The Failure of Leftist Politics in Pynchon's *Vineland*." *LIT* 4, 87-99.
- Buck-Morss, Susan (1992). "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered". *October* 62, Fall, 3-41.
- Bumas, E. Shaskan (1995). "The Utopian States of America: The People, The Republic, and Rock and Roll in Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*." *Arizona Quarterly* 52:3, Autumn, 148-175.
- Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Cameron, James (1984). *The Terminator* written by James Cameron and William Wisher, Jr. Directed by James Cameron, Carolco Pictures, inc.
- Champagne, Roland (1995). *Jacques Derrida*. New York: Twayne.
- Chilwell, Jan (1994). "Medium of Mayhem". *New Zealand Listener*, October 22, 42.

- Cholodenko, Alan (1991a). "Introduction". *The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation* (ed) Alan Cholodenko. Sydney: Power Productions, 9-36.
- Cholodenko, Alan (1991b). "Who Framed Roger Rabbit, or the Framing of Animation". *The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation* (ed) Alan Cholodenko. Sydney: Power Productions, 209-242.
- Chow, Rey (1993). "Ethics After Idealism". *Diacritics* 23:1, Spring, 3-22.
- Chow, Rey (1995). "The Fascist Longings in Our Midst." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 26:1 January, 23-50.
- Cixous Hélène (1976). "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs* 1:4, 875-93.
- Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 8th ed. (ed) R.E. Allen. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.
- Critchley, Simon (1992). *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- D'Evelyn, Thomas (1990). "Life in 11-Minute Segments". *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 7.
- Debord, Guy (1977). *The Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red.
- DeLillo, Don (1986). *End Zone*. New York: Penguin [1972].
- DeLillo, Don (1986). *White Noise*. London: Picador [1984].
- DeLillo, Don (1991). *Ratner's Star*. New York: Vintage [1976].
- Derrida, Jacques (1974). *Of Grammatology* (tr) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1977). *Limited Inc.* (tr) Samuel Weber. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1981). "Plato's Pharmacy". Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (tr) Barbara Johnson. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 74-139.
- Derrida, Jaques (1982). "Ousia and Gramm[e]: Note on a Note From *Being and Time*" Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (tr) Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 29-68.
- Derrida, Jacques (1988). "The Politics of Friendship" (tr) Gabriel Motzkin. *Journal of Philosophy* 85, November, 632-44.
- Derrida, Jacques (1992). *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (tr) Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Dijkstra, Bram (1996). *Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality and the Cult of Manhood*. New York: Knopf.
- Dugdale, John (1990). *Thomas Pynchon: Allusive Parables of Power*. New York: St. Marten's Press.
- Easthope, Anthony and Kate McGowan (eds) (1992). *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Ellis, Bret Easton (1986). *Less Than Zero*. London: Picador [1982].
- Ellis, Bret Easton (1991). *American Psycho*. London: Picador
- Foster, Hal (1983). "Postmodernism: A Preface". *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (ed) Hal Foster. Port Townsend, Bay Press, ix-xvi.
- Foster, Hal (1991). "Armor Fou" *October* 56, Spring, 64-97.
- Frecero, Carla (1997). "Historical Violence, Censorship and the Serial Killer: The Case of *American Psycho*". *Diacritics* 27:2, Summer, 44-58.
- Friedrich, Carl J., et. al (1969). *Totalitarianism in Perspective: Three Views* with Michael Curtis and Benjamin R. Barber. London: Pall Mall Press.
- Habermas, Jurgen (1983). "Modernity - An Incomplete Project". *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (ed) Hal Foster. Port Townsend, Bay Press, 3-15.
- Hans, James S. (1988). "Gravity's Rainbow and the Literature of Renewal". *Essays in Literature* 15:2, Fall, 267-284.
- Haraway, Donna (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Hayles, N. Katherine (1994). "'Who was saved?': Families, Snitches, and Recuperation in Pynchon's *Vineland*". *The Vineland Papers* (ed) Geoffrey Green, Donald J Greiner and Larry McCaffery. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 14-30.
- Heller, Amanda (1976). "Ratner's Star by Don DeLillo". *Atlantic Monthly* 238, August, 86.
- Herron, Jerry (1993). "Homer Simpson's Eyes and the Culture of Late Nostalgia." *Representations* 43, Summer, 1-26.
- Heyler, Ruth (2000). "Parodied to Death: The Postmodern Gothic of *American Psycho*". *Modern Fiction Studies* 46:3, Fall, 725-746.
- Hill, Steven (undated internet page). "American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis". [www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/Porn/Ellis2](http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/Porn/Ellis2)

- Hite, Molly (c1983). *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Hite, Molly (1994). "Feminist Theory and the Politics of *Vineland*". *The Vineland Papers* (ed) Geoffrey Green, Donald J Greiner and Larry McCaffery. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 135-153.
- Holden, Stephen (1996). "How Baseball Becomes an Irrational Pastime". *New York Times*, August 16, final late ed, section C, 3.
- Horkheimer, Max and Theodore Adorno (1993). *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (tr) John Cumming. New York, Continuum.
- Hume, Kathryn (1992). "Repetition and the Construction of Character in *Gravity's Rainbow*." *Critique* 33:4, Summer, 243-54.
- Hutcheon, Linda (1988). *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge.
- Irigaray, Luce (1985). *This Sex Which is Not One* (tr) Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. Ithica: Cornell University Press.
- Irwin, Mark (1991). "A Note on 'Porky Pig and the Anarchist' in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*". *Pynchon Notes* 28-29, Spring-Fall, 55-57.
- James, Caryn (1995). "Sylvester Stallone, Judge. Uh oh". *New York Times*, June 30, final late ed, section C, 3.
- Jameson, Fredric (1983): "Postmodernism and Consumer Society". *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (ed) Hal Foster. Port Townsend: Bay Press, 111-125.
- Jameson, Fredric (c1991). *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Jencks, Charles (1987). *The Language of Post Modern Architecture*. London: Academy.
- Jones, Charles M. (1953). "Duck Amuck" written by Michael Maltese. Directed by Charles M. Jones, Warner Brothers Pictures.
- Kakutami, Miichiko (1995). "They're Liars, and That's Just the Least of Their Problems". *New York Times*, May 26, final late ed, section C, 28.
- Kaplan, Alice Yaeger (1986). *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Keesey, Douglas (1986). "Nature and the Supernatural: Pynchon's Ecological Ghost Stories." *Pynchon Notes* 18-19, Spring-Fall, 84-95.
- Kellner, Douglas (1989). *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and*

- Beyond*. Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Basil Blackwell.
- Korten, David C. (1995). *When Corporations Rule the World*. West Hartford: Kumarian Press.
- Kristeva, Julia (1980). *Desire in Language* (tr) Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon S. Roudiez. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Kristeva, Julia (1982). *The Powers of Horror* (tr) Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, Julia (1984a). *Revolution in Poetic Language* (tr) Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, Julia (1984b). *Tales of Love* (tr) Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kunzle, David (1973). *The History of the Comic Strips: The Early Comic Strip*. Berkely: University of California Press.
- Kunzle, David (1990). *The History of the Comic Strip: The Nineteenth Century*. Berkely: University of California Press.
- Lacan, Jacques (1977). *Ecrits: A Selection* (tr) Alan Sheridan. London: Tavistock Books.
- Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. New York: Verso.
- Laclau, Ernesto (1990). *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. New York: Verso.
- Laclau, Ernesto (ed) (1994). *The Making of Political Identities*. New York: Verso.
- Laclau, Ernesto (1995). "The Time is Out of Joint" *Diacritics* 25:2, Summer 1995, 86-96.
- Le Blanc, Paul (1995). "Culture, Identity, Class Struggle: Practical Critique of the Discourse on Post-Marxism." *Post-Ality: Marxism and Postmodernism* (ed) Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, Teresa L. Ebert and Donald Morton. Washington DC: Maisonneuve Press, 290-301.
- Lechte, John (1990). *Julia Kristeva*. London: Routledge.
- Lefort, Claude (1986). *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (ed and introduced) John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Polity.
- Lummis, C. Douglas (1996). *Radical Democracy*. Ithica: Cornell University Press.

- Lyotard, J.F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition* (tr) Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mackey, Louis (1981). "Paranoia, Pynchon and Preterition". *Sub Stance* 30, 16-30.
- Maslin, Janet (1995). "Showgirls". *New York Times*, September 22, final late ed, section C, 1.
- McDonald, William (1996). "Brothers in a Movie World of Their Own". *New York Times*, March 3, final late ed, section 2, 1.
- Melley, Timothy (1994). "Bodies Incorporated: Scenes of Agency Panic in *Gravity's Rainbow*". *Contemporary Literature* 35:4, Winter, 709-738.
- Michels, Pete (1999). "Homer to the Max" written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Pete Michels. *The Simpsons*, created by Matt Groening; 20th Century Fox, episode AABF09/SI-1009.
- Moore, Rich (1991). "Stark Raving Dad" written by Al Jean and Mike Reiss. Directed by Rich Moore. *The Simpsons*, created by Matt Groening; 20th Century Fox, episode 7F24.
- Morawski, Stefan (1996). *The Troubles With Postmodernism*. London: Routledge.
- Morley, John David (1996). "All Germans Look Alike". *New York Times*, April 21, final late ed, section 7, 41.
- Mouffe, Chantal (ed) (1992). *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*. London: Verso.
- Mouffe, Chantal (1993). *The Return of the Political*. London: Verso.
- New Concise Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, New Zealand ed. (ed) Ian A. Gordon. Auckland: Collins, 1982.
- Newsom, Robert (1988). *A Likely Story: Probability and Play in Fiction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Olderman, Raymond M. (1983). "The New Consciousness and the Old System". *Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow* (ed) Charles Clerc. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 199-228.
- Olster, Stacey (1994). "When You're a (Nin)jette, You're a (Nin)jette All the Way – Or Are You?: Female Filmmaking in *Vineland*". *The Vineland Papers* (ed) Geoffrey Green, Donald J Greiner and Larry McCaffery. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 119-134.
- Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary* (ed) Joyce M. Hawkins and Robert Allen.



Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.

Pool, Gail (1987). "William T. Vollmann's *You Bright and Risen Angels: A Cartoon*". *New York Times Book Review*, June 21, 10.

Price, David W. (1998). "Bakhtinian Prosaics, Grotesque Realism and the Question of the Carnavalesque in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*". *Southern Humanities Review* 32:4, Fall, 321-346.

Pynchon, Thomas (1975). *Gravity's Rainbow*. London: Picador [1973].

Pynchon, Thomas (1979). *The Crying of Lot 49*. London: Picador [1966].

Pynchon, Thomas (1991). *Vineland*. London: Minerva.

Pynchon, Thomas (1995). *V*. London: Vintage [1963].

Pynchon, Thomas (1997). *Mason & Dixon*. London: Cape.

Rowe, Kathleen (1995). *The Unruly Woman*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Safer, Elaine B (1994). "Pynchon's World and Its Legendary Past: Humour and the Absurd in a Twentieth Century Vineland." *The Vineland Papers* (ed) Geoffrey Green, Donald J Greiner and Larry McCaffery. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 46-67.

Schapiro, Leonard (1972). *Totalitarianism*. London: Pall Mall Press.

Seltzer, Mark (1992). *Bodies and Machines*. New York: Routledge.

Seltzer, Mark (1995): "Serial Killers (II): The Pathological Public Sphere." *Critical Inquiry* 22:1, Autumn 1995, 122-149.

Shirer, William L (1991). *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. London: Mandarin.

Siegel, Mark (1978). *Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow*. Port Washington: Kennikat Press.

Sklar, Robert (1978). "An Anarchist Miricle: The Novels of Thomas Pynchon." *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays* (ed) Edward Mendelsen. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 87-96.

Slade, Joseph W. (1994). "Communication, Group Theory, and Perception in *Vineland*". *The Vineland Papers* (ed) Geoffrey Green, Donald J Greiner and Larry McCaffery. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 68-88.

Small, Edward S. and Eugene Levinson (1989). "Toward a Theory of Animation". *The Velvet Light Trap* 24, Fall 1989, 67-74.

- Solomon, Eric (1994). "Argument by Anachronism: The Presence of the 1930s in *Vineland*". *The Vineland Papers* (ed) Geoffrey Green, Donald J Greiner and Larry McCaffery. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 161-166.
- Somerville, Ross (1996). "The Virtual Woman". *New Zealand Listener*, December 7, 48.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1990). *The Post Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (ed) Sarah Harasym. New York: Routledge.
- Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White (1986). *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. London: Methuen.
- Stern, J.P. (1973). *On Realism*. London: Routledge.
- Stevens, H. Brenton (1997). "'Look! Up in the Sky! It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's... Rocketman!': Pynchon's Comic Book Mythology in *Gravity's Rainbow*". *Studies in Popular Culture* 19:3, April, 37-48.
- Tabbi, Joseph (1994). "Pynchon's Groundward Art". *The Vineland Papers* (ed) Geoffrey Green, Donald J Greiner and Larry McCaffery. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 89-100.
- Tanner, Laura E (c1994). "American Psycho and The American Psyche: Reading the Forbidden Text". Laura E. Tanner, *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth Century Fiction*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 96-116.
- Tanner, Tony (1971). *City of Words*. London: Cape.
- Tanner, Tony (1982). *Thomas Pynchon*. London: Methuen.
- Teachout, Terry (1996). "Scoundrel Time". *New York Times*, June 23, final late ed, section 7, 34.
- Theweleit, Klaus (1989a). *Male Fantasies Volume 1: Women Floods Bodies History* (tr) Stephen Conway in collaboration with Erica Carter and Chris Turner. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Theweleit, Klaus (1989b). *Male Fantasies Volume 2: Male Bodies: Psychoanalysing the White Terror* (tr) Erica Carter and Chris Turner in collaboration with Stephen Conway. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tucker, Ken (1991). "The Splatterpunk Trend, And Welcome to It." *New York Times Book Review*, March 24, 13-14.
- Turner, Victor (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. London: Routledge and K. Paul.

- Udovitch, Mim (1991). "Intentional Phalluses". *Village Voice*, March 19, 1991, 65-66.
- Vonnegut, Kurt (1979). *Slaughterhouse Five*. London: Triad/Grenada [1969].
- Waugh, Patricia (1992). "From Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory". *Postmodernism: A Reader* (ed) Patricia Waugh. London: Edward Arnold, 189-204.
- Weisenburger, Steven (1988). *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- White, Allon (1982). "Pigs and Pierrots: The Politics of Transgression in Modern Fiction". *Raritan* 2:2, 51-70.
- Wolf, Naomi (1990). *The Beauty Myth*. London: Vintage.
- Wolitzer, Meg (1987). "Review". *New York Times Book Review*, January 4, 10.
- Wood, Ellen Meiksins (1995). "What is the 'Postmodern' Agenda? An Introduction". *Monthly Review* 47:3, Summer, 1-12.
- Young, Elizabeth (1992). "The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet: Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*." Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney, *Shopping In Space: Essays on American "Blank Generation" Fiction*. London: Serpent's Tail, 85-122.
- Zaller, Robert (1993). "*American Psycho*, American Censorship, and the Dahmer Case". *Revue Française D'études Américaines* 57, July 1993, 317-325.
- Zavarzadeh, Mas'ud (1995). "Post-Ality: The (Dis)Simulations of Cybercapitalism." *Post-Ality: Marxism and Postmodernism* (ed) Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, Teresa L. Ebert and Donald Morton. Washington DC: Maisonneuve Press, 1-75.
- Zemeckis, Robert (1988). *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* written by Gary K. Wolf, Jeffrey Price and Peter S. Seaman. Directed by Robert Zemeckis, Touchstone Pictures.